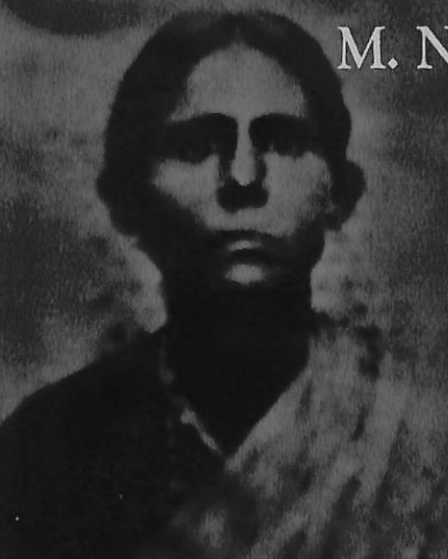


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THE
SURABHI THEATRE
OF
ANDHRA
A LIVING LEGEND

M. Nagabhushana Sarma



RANGA SAMPADA
HYDERABAD

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A LIVING LEGEND



M. NAGABHUSHANA SARMA



A 'Ranga Sampada' Publication
With the active support of the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham



The Surabhi Theatre of Andhra :
A Living Legend

By Prof. M. Nagabhushana Sarma

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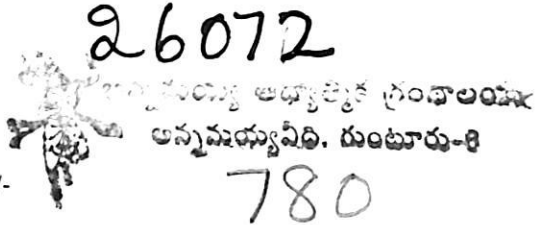
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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to



Sri K.V. Ramana, I.A.S.,
Executive Officer, Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams
in appreciation of his deep concern and love for
artists and scholars

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HOMAGE

Respectful homage to



Late Sri Garimella Rama Murthy

A life-long friend of Surabhi People

INTRODUCTION

Surabhi, a unique institution of family theatres, has an unrivalled place in the history of Indian theatre. Perhaps it is the only example of a professional, family-theatre which has an unbroken record of 120 years. This unique achievement seems to have been acquired by their belonging to one large family, not heard of elsewhere.

We have professional theatres that raise a company on professional terms, train their actors, pay them and do a repertoire of plays whenever needed. There were 'commercial theatres', at least at one point of time in the past when theatre was a money-spinning enterprise in which proprietors had an eye on profits. But there are no 'family theatres' which are professional in attitude and commercial in their approach (since they have to live on it) and their profession is hereditary. Unlike other "companies" that flourished in the last quarter of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th and slowly dwindled away, Surabhi lived on. The strength of the Surabhi theatres lies in their being "family theatres" that practised a strictly professional attitude in their avocation.

This book is an attempt to present the long and fascinating history of these companies, their performance skills, their solidarity, their professionalism and the noteworthy achievements of a few outstanding performers, besides offering a trajectory of the companies' sojourn.

I am indebted to hundreds of Surabhi men and women whom I knew for the last thirty five years. Since my friend Sri Garimella Rama Murty, a benefactor of the Surabhi people, Sri A.R.Krishna, a veteran theatre person and I, with the assistance of stalwarts like S.A. Baba Rao, and others started annual Surabhi festivals on 19th of December every year in Hyderabad, it caught the public eye and the government's concern. Sri K.V.Ramana I.A.S. and several other officers stood by them through thick and thin and helped them to overcome many a hurdle.

I am indebted to several people without whose support this book would not have been complete. My thanks are due to :

Surabhi elders who took me into their fold as a member of their families and shared with me their varied experiences;

Surabhi youngsters for their love and respect for me and my wife and their readiness to help us in times of need;

R. Nageswara Rao (Babji) for his keen interest in the project and also for accompanying me to several places connected with Surabhi antecedents;

the people of Surabhi village and of Polasanipally for their hearty welcome and queer inquisitiveness in the project;

the revenue officials of Kadapa collectorate and the then Collector of Kadapa, Sri K.V. Ramana, for allowing me to look into the documents;

the managers of the Surabhi companies for sharing my worries in the publication of this book;

Sri Jaganmohan Reddy of Karshak Art Printers for his concern and support;

Sri Shakiil'Hmed and K. Prasad for working overtime to make the press copy ready;

and many more Surabhi men and women, young and old whose devotion to their work inspired me to write this history.

My wife, Dr.Saraswathi, who has been an ardent admirer of and a fine host to the Surabhi people all these years, is, in fact, the coauthor of this venture and I thank her for her love and concern for the welfare of every Surabhi individual. Both of us are proud and happy that we could make this happen.

M. Nagabhushana Sarma

Multiple Performance Traditions and Surabhi's Genesis

A typical rural setting.

A make - shift hall covered with zinc sheets.

Time : 9.30 in the night.

A bell, resembling a temple bell, is heard.

Silence.

The harmonium buzz.

A chorus follows : Young and old, male and female voices in unison.

“Sri Sarada tanaya.....” in *Raag Kafi* and *Rupak tal*: a prayer requesting Lord Ganesha to shower his blessings on all – the actors and the audience alike.

Another long bell.

The auditorium lights are put off.

Hypnotic music suggesting a miracle. Drums. The Gong.

Setting : The Ocean of Milk against a blue background.

Narada and the gods descend from heaven.

Sages assemble against hymns of Veda.

On the ocean lies Maha Vishnu with his consort Laxmi at his feet.

The gods and sages sing in praise of him as the Lord Protector.

Maha Vishnu enquires the reason for their coming.

The Demons are attacking them, once again; they say.

It is King Kamsa now.

Maha Vishnu assures them of his appearance on earth. He will be born as the eighth child of Vasudeva and Devaki.

The assemblage feels relieved and disperses, singing again in praise of Him.

Black out.

Sounds of Thunder.

The Demons are enjoying their new victory.

Thunder again.

Kamsa appears with roaring laughter....on a chariot drawn by sages.

He orders that sages be put to severe punishment.

He disappears. Big noise of the demon soldiers beating the sages!

* * * * *

Scene after scene, thus, moves on swiftly.

A wonderment of a rare kind!

Scenes change in split seconds; each scene is embedded in astonishing stage effects. Angels disappear; Gods appear from above, from the pit and from everywhere. Demons are crushed down into the earth. Chariots run across. Elephants and tigers appear.

All these feats happening before our eyes.

Song, drama, rhetoric, poems recited in chaste ragas, spectacle of a rare kind –

This, in short, is a ‘Surabhi play’ – mythology recreated before our very eyes.

And such happenings take place everyday; and have been so for the last one hundred and twenty years!

That is Surabhi Theatre!! An old-time world revealed for us today.

Surabhi is a bye-word for professional theatre at its best and stands as a synonym for family theatre. It is a commercially successful venture in the field of modern drama. It is vibrant as theatre and is patronized both by the city and rural theatre lovers.

What makes Surabhi a unique phenomenon? What factors contributed to make it so and in the process build a solid tradition of theatre culture in rural India? And that too from very humble and shaky beginnings to a solid tradition of theatre culture, rarely seen in the present-day commercial world?

Surabhi is the name of a village². The village and its presiding patriarchs invited the artists to come and stay in the village and continued to extend their patronage for several years until they made a name in the theatrical world outside.

How could a theatre tradition live for 120 and odd years with its basic structure intact? Six generations of the same families engaged on each day to entertain audiences with song, drama, speech and spectacle!

Such a hereditary continuity can be seen in all temple arts, especially rural arts in their daily services to gods. They are hereditary, but seasonal. Not so the Surabhi.

There are commercial ventures – then and now. Their continuity depends upon their commercial viability – if they succeed, they continue. Not so the Surabhi.

Some village, temple/god-based performances are not uncommon. They are also seasonal, like the 'leela' plays and the Bhagavata Mela natakams. They are not professional productions. Not so the Surabhi.

So, Surabhi is not seasonal, it is not amateur and it is not a commercial venture, in the sense that it does not operate purely on monetary gains.

Surabhi, in short, designates a family that chose theatre as a profession.

What circumstances helped to make this venture viable? In order to understand the bewilderingly risky profession the Surabhi people are engaged in, we must understand the multiple influences that sustain this unique tradition.

The Surabhi theatre seems to have been influenced by three distinct performance traditions :

1. The folk theatre tradition of Andhra, especially the tradition of puppetry.
2. The modern dramatic experiments in Andhra.
3. The Parsi theatre.

All these have a strong say in the making of the Surabhi theatres.

The Folk Theatre Tradition

The history of the folk performance tradition and the multiplicity of forms that entertained the rural folk are complex and are strongly embedded in the ritualistic celebrations of local gods and goddesses. The early thirteenth century Saiva poet, Palkuriki Somanatha describes such celebratory performances presented during a Sivarathri festival³. The most important among them are – a Yaksha woman singing the story of a deity⁴; puppets being played behind a white curtain while stories from the epics are narrated⁵; and dramas written in the well-established classical model containing all the necessary 'limbs' (anga-s) of linguistic and performative excellence⁶. These three can be indentified as

the *Yakshagana* – a dance narrative ; the shadow puppet play – *Tolu Bommalata* ; and the *nataka*. However, the most popular among these was the puppet play which has had a long history of over eight hundred years.

The Puppet Play

Eversince man's imagination wanted to capture the splendours of the myths and the mythical characters therein, they started creating figures in whatever materials they used in their day-to-day life and narrating stories about them. The earliest such form is the 'Doll Theatre'⁷ – narrating a story by manipulating dolls. It is "narrative drama". The Mandahechus, a sub-sect of the Yadava community and their caste historians, narrate the stories from yadava myths with 50 figures that are 'characters' in their 'drama'.

This form of narrative was quickly followed by 'Scroll Theatre'⁸ (Patam Kathalu) a more artistic rendering of a story through a series of beautifully-painted figure brackets on the cloth. The scroll is usually of 50 meters long and contains about 250 group figures. There are ten different varieties of Scroll painting narratives still in vogue – the "Kakipadagala" being the most popular. It is a visual and aural feast to listen and see a scroll narrative. Since the cost for preparing a scroll has increased exorbitantly and as caste narratives are slowly losing their base, the art form is on the verge of extinction. The "kakipadagala" sect also narrates the Mahabharata story and so its performances are addressed to a more broad-based audience.

The doll and scroll narratives, in course of time, developed into two types of Puppetry. Story narration by manipulating wooden puppets was developed from the earlier doll narratives and the scroll narrative was developed into leather puppetry. All the four traditions are rich in Andhra. The string and the rod puppets are wooden figures. Even here there is a distinction – the string puppet figures are delicate, light and small to enable easy manipulation, whereas the rod puppets are heavy figures and are manipulated with strong iron rods hooked to the various parts of the figure.

The Leather Puppet Play – *Tolu Bommalata*⁸ – is often called the shadow puppet theatre because of the shadows thrown on the white screen by figures played on the screen through proper lighting coming from behind the figures. All puppet plays need exceptional manipulatory skills. The shadow plays are often considered India's 'earliest version of cinema', because of their multi-coloured visuality and their textual and performative exuberance.

Made with parchment of leather, a puppet is made with impeccable artistry. The figure is cut to size and separate pieces are carefully chiseled – the hands, the legs, the torso and the head. Each part is coloured as per conventions and they are stitched together. This enables the manipulator to move each limb of the figure as he wants. The ornamentation is done in a simple method by perforating different sizes of holes on the figure. When light passes through the perforations with their background colour reflecting on the white screen, we have precious rubies, diamonds and emeralds of the leather figures shining.

Many of the texts for singing are common to Shadow Puppet plays as well as Bhagavathams¹⁰. *Lepakshi Ramayanam* and *Vemulapalli Bharatham* are the two popular ones, with an amalgamation of different *daruvus*¹¹ (situational songs) and poems drawn from various other sources. One of the finest attributes of a puppet play are the comic trio – Kethigadu, Bangarakka and Juttu Poligadu. They come on to the screen whenever the puppeteers want to entertain their audience with gimmicks, rebukes, double meaning songs, abuses (sometimes vulgar) and kicks and fights.

For over eight centuries, leather puppet plays offered unstinted entertainment in rural Andhra, pleasing the elite and the commoner alike. It was at the height of its popularity in the 18th and 19th centuries, since Bhagavathams have become either more and more ritualistic or more and more classical. Puppetry was the singular means of entertainment with its songs, *slokas*, dramatic

prose dialogue, mesmerizing manipulation of the puppets, the pleasing multi-coloured puppets, and above all, the impish humour one finds in the puppet plays with the comic trio.

It was at the height of the popularity of puppetry that several families of Maharastrian origin, called the "Aare" people, chose puppetry as their profession, a decision, which changed the lives of some "Aare" families and also influenced, to some extent, the course of modern Telugu Theatre! It is to some of these puppet families that the present-day Surabhi people originally belonged.

2. Modern theatre in Andhra

Modern theatre in Andhra, as elsewhere in India, was an offshoot of English education. School and college education in English preceded the establishment of the Universities in 1858. However, when the universities at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras came into existence, English education came nearer to the middle class people. Thus texts of Shakespeare and Sheridan, studied in the class rooms, opened new vistas of dramatic writing to young intellectuals, resulting in translating these and similar other plays into Telugu. The first plays translated are those that were prescribed as text books in the university classes.

Simultaneously, people who were already exposed to the native dramatic tradition looked at the rich dramatic lore in Sanskrit with awe and reverence and took to translating them.

In no time, the college-borne scholars realized that they could write plays combining the two dissimilar traditions with newly invented themes and all the three types¹² appeared in the first ten years after the emergence of the Universities.

It is commonly believed that Modern Telugu drama had its beginnings when Korada Ramachandra Sastry, a Sanskrit pundit of Machilipatnam, a port town, wrote *Manjari Madhukareeyam*¹³, a four-act *natika* on a love theme written in Sanskritized diction. In the absence of substantial evidence to prove the veracity of this claim, it is safe to believe that the first play in modern Telugu

dramatic literature is Kokkonda Venkataratnam Pantulu's translation of *Narakasura Vijaya Vyayogam*, a Sanskrit play by Varanasi Dharma Suri written and published in 1872. From 1872 to 1880 Sanskrit and English plays were translated and a beginning was made to write original plays on contemporary social themes.

Mention must be made of Veeresalingam Pantulu's translation of *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* (1872-75), an unfinished translation of the same play by Paravastu Rangacharyulu (1872) and *The Merchant of Venice* by Gurazada Srirama Murthy (1875). However, the tallest figure in the first decade after the emergence of dramatic literature in Telugu was Vavilala Vasudeva Sastry. A scholar proficient in Telugu, Sanskrit and English, he translated Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1875) into Telugu in a metre reminiscent of the English Blank Verse, Bhavabhuti's *Uttara Rama Caritra* (1880) and also wrote an original Telugu play *Nandaka Rajyamu* (1882) on the rivalry of two sects of the Brahmin community, the last play being the first social play in Telugu.

The year 1880 initiated theatre activities in Andhra when the reformist-literateur Kandukuri Veresalingam produced his own satirical play *Vyavahara Dharma Bodhini*, a biting indictment on the existing evils of the legal profession. Looking at the contemporary orthodox attack on the play, both on its theme and much worse, on drama as a medium of expression, theatrical practices would have had a set back but for the timely visit of a Dharwad-based dramatic troupe called the "Tantipurastha Nataka Samajam"¹⁴. Which toured the most important cultural centres of Andhra in 1880-81 and performed plays in Hindi. These plays, performed with care and diligence, provided such a stimulus to Telugu writers and actors that wherever they performed, there arose active theatrical companies which engaged themselves in serious dramatic activity.



Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu, who is responsible for introducing
Padya Natakam,
 a style that ruled Telugu theatre for half a century

When the first performance of the Surabhi people took place in 1885, Telugu theatre just crossed its infancy and was ready for a head-long start on experimentation. The first and the foremost experiment that had a sway over Telugu theatre was the verse play in which the use of 'raga' in rendering poems as well as the use of action—songs of several types¹⁵ became obligatory. These musical innovations, made by Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu, a Bellary-based advocate-dramatist-actor-director, changed the entire course of theatrical practice in Andhra. When Surabhi took to professional performances in 1889, they were already exposed to this kind of poetic play. With careful guidance from their director Subbadas they mastered this technique of singing both poems and songs by the time they consolidated their theatre activities by 1895.

3. The Parsi Theatre¹⁶

The third influence that shaped the commercial outlook of Surabhi is that of the 'Parsi' theatre. The word 'Parsi theatre' stands for several things. Firstly it was a blanket term for all the theatre houses built by the rich Parsi community of Bombay. It also included Parsi plays and playwrights, Parsi theatrical companies

including Parsi actors, actresses and directors. The Company owners and those who worked on a salary are also included under the banner. Beginning in 1846, Parsi theatre had soon become a bye-word for a new audience of urban India, not the elitist connoisseurs of the old Sanskrit theatre, nor the large rural masses who flocked around the traditional folk theatre, but entirely new audiences, whose sole aim was to be 'entertained' through song, drama and dance, whatever be their quality. A penchant for song and dance, and a love for thrilling scenes of a make-believe world made these plays immediate successes with audiences all over India.

The Parsi theatre emerged from a pre-existing form of theatre, which dated back to 1776. During the first phase from 1776 to 1819, there were records to show that it performed English plays popular then in England to English audiences in Bombay. Sheridan was a popular writer and found favour with the audiences. During its second phase from 1819 which opened with a play, *The Road to Ruin*, written by Holcroft and had the patronage of the then Governor of Bombay, melodramas ruled the stage. The third phase started in 1835 when the same theatre was bought by Jamshed Ji Jejeebhoy, but was closed because of financial crisis. After 10 years, a theatre was built on Grant Road, in the land donated by Jagannath Shankar Seth, a "wealthy Bombay Merchant" and was inaugurated on February 16, 1846, which became the centre of the Parsi theatre tradition.

In the beginning melodramas and farces as in contemporary British theatre were popular on the stage. Slowly the audience began to change. More and more Parsis and Hindus came to see the plays and so the plays had to be changed according to the tastes of the audience. Marathi, Gujarati and Hindusthani plays took over the stage.

Among the plays that were popularized by these companies, many were based on Persian mythology and history. Each show contained a play and a farce, the farce being a satire on contemporary Bombay scene. English plays were freely adapted either into Gujarati or Hindusthani. The story of Rustum and Sohrab was dramatized by several writers. *Inder Sabha*, a musical extraganza of songs and dances, became an instantaneous success. It was only in the early 20th C. that these Parsi theatres took to plays from Hindu mythology due to public demand. Plays like *Harischandra*, *Prahlada* and *Gopichand* were popular.

Several of the well-established teams, which had a strong group of actors and actresses toured all over the country. The most popular groups that came to the South several times were two Parsi Companies, The New Alfred Company which came to Madras in 1879 and the Victorian Theatrical Company, which toured Madras Presidency at least three times – in 1880, in 1888 and finally in 1901. The first time it came under the proprietorship of Dadabhai Sohrabji Patel and the second and third times it was under Khurshedji Mehrvanji Balivala, the famous actor - manager of the Victoria Theatrical Company, which was popularly called the Balivala company.

The impact of Parsi Theatres on South Indian Theatres

From the beginnings of the Parsi Theatre in 1846 to 1870 the audience mainly consisted of Parsis and Iranis. Stray groups of British soldiers also formed a part. When in 1870 Dadi Patel initiated staging plays in Urdu instead of in Gujarati, the audience grew and consisted of both Hindus and Muslims. This also included a large number of Parsi Women. Sometimes there were shows for women exclusively. There were usually 4 classes of tickets – Box (Rs.6/-), Upper Box (Rs.4/-), Pit (Rs.3/-) and Balcony (Rs.2).

Songs constituted a larger part of a play. Hindusthani music with its *tumris* and *gazals* formed an important part. Popular dances of Maharashtra and Gujarat like the *tappas* were seen with great admiration. Songs often were greeted with 'once more' and demanded a song's repetition even after the curtain fell.

Audience were especially thrilled by spectacular scenes: Gods descending from heavens, demons descending into earth, beds flown into air, broken bridges fall into seas and so on. Such 'trick' scenes were the main attraction for the common people. In a play like *Inder Sabha* by Ananth, each angel came into Indra's court with great aplomb and flood of light to the wonderment of the audience.

Usually there were 14 to 15 curtains that depicted different locales. The drop scene usually contained a scenery painted on it. A street scene worked as a general scene. Several 'cut scenes' formed part of the general background, especially in the forest scenes. Big fighting scenes were advertised specially and drew crowds. The performance space was usually 60' (width) and 40' (depth) with an addition of 10' of wing space. Painted curtains, dropped from pulleys, served as background to each scene.

Eversince female actors were employed in the companies, the companies flourished economically. Their income doubled and there was a rush for tickets.

These features easily reveal that all the South Indian professional theatre groups borrowed several of them and the influence of this spectacular fare influenced the Nataka Mandalis, front-ranking among them being the Chenna Basaveswara Kripa Poshita Sangham, popularly called the Gubbi company¹⁷, Raja Manickam Pillai company and Surabhi company. Among the three, Surabhi is the one which sustained the onslaught of time, whereas Gubbi Company's popularity waned with the death of Gubbi

Veeranna and the subsequent winding of the theatre. So was the case with Raja Manickam Pillai's Theatre, Kannaya company and several others. In fact, Andhra itself had seen the rise and fall of several professional theatre companies in the later part of 19th c. and early 20th c. Major among them was the Hindu Nataka Samajam at Rajahmundry followed later by other professional companies like the Mylavaram company and the Mothe company.

Though the Parsi companies visited Andhra only from 1885 onwards, such companies frequented visits to Madras and Bangalore even by 1879. Surabhi, being geographically closer to both these towns and Madras being the State capital, the elders of the village and its neighbourhood, might have seen the Parsi performances and narrated anecdotes about them. Whenever an opportunity arose, their patrons took the leaders to such shows. In later years, after 1901, the Surabhi people started several of the stage effects that made 'Parsi' popular.

Surabhi - a Living Tradition

Surabhi theatre has emerged strong and consolidated itself on the firm foundations drawn from these triple traditions. From the folk theatre from which it had grown Surabhi acquired the belief that family should be the nucleus of their activity as it was during the "puppetry" days. Though, in later years, they tried to wean away from other customs and practices of old days, they have always been firm on the need for retaining their activity "family-centred" and are successful in gaining recognition as the only family professional theatre group which continued the tradition for the last 120 years.

The second influence was that of singing. Surabhi gratefully borrowed the singing practices of the then emerging Telugu theatre introduced by Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu, especially in elaborate "raga-rendering" of both poems and songs. The

singing as well as speech practices in puppet performances were entirely different from those used in verse-plays. This sophisticated mood-centred and emotion-ridden musical recitation of poems was taught to them by Subbadas who was an adept in the “Verse-drama” (*padya natakam*) tradition even before he joined the Surabhi group. Reports of the Surabhi group’s first tour in Andhra in 1899-1900 indicates that they mastered this art of the Padya Natakam. The several raving reviews that appeared in the newspapers of the time also indicate that the productions were of a high order ; but they also make a point clear. By that time they have neither acquired technical skills nor implemented them.

With the marked influence of the Parsi theatre practices, Surabhi soon assimilated the technical effects both directly from Parsi theatre productions as well as through the productions of Gubbi, Kannayya and Raja Manickam Pillai professional theatre groups. Elaborate stage settings, quick-changing scenes, using lighting gadgets for special effects, the stage-trap devices are all intelligently borrowed. When once Surabhi technicians borrow any new device, they ‘own’ it so quickly and so completely that such a borrowing becomes a natural part of their entire production design.

Thus the three influences – of the folk theatre, the Padya natakam and the Parsi theatre – show three early stages of development in the history of Surabhi theatres and helped to develop a theatre tradition of their own.

How this uniqueness is achieved provides us as fascinating a story as that of a Surabhi production!

NOTES

1. The two episodes form the summary of the first two sequences of Panditha K. Subrahmanya Sastry's *Sri Krishna Leclalu*, 1904.
2. The village now called 'Surabhi' in Rayachoti Taluq of Kadapa District was originally called 'Sorugu', a distorted word for 'sarugu', so called, as the elders say, because of the barren land with large tracks of "sarugudu" trees. However, "Surabhi" has been in use since the beginning of 19th c.

But, another version, narrated by Peddi Reddy of the Village (aged 84 yrs.) says that the word "Sarugu" means "increase" or "grow". Narrating an incident when the founder of the village of "Ayyappareddy" family, was travelling with his priest from Pulivendula to Gundlur and when they came to this spot, the priest asked the Reddy to found a village here because it is a blessed place and the clan will "grow".
3. Palkuriki Somanatha, *Panditaradhya Charitramu*, 1937 (Vavilla Publication), p. 124.
4. *Op. cit.* pp. 435-36.
5. *Op. cit.* p. 434.
6. *Op. cit.* p. 436
7. "Doll Theatre" narrates a story through speech, song and dramatic action. The narrator in a neutral attire manipulates the dolls, which are the characters in the narrative and narrates the caste stories. The dolls change from episode to episode.
8. "Scroll Theatre" is "narrative drama" with the help of a long scroll on which paintings of characters and situations are drawn in representing different characters in action.

Both doll and scroll narrative are concerned with caste myths and the narrators belong to a dependent caste.
9. See for details, M. Nagabhushana Sarma, *Tolu Bommalata : The Shadow Puppet Theatre of Andhra Pradesh*, New Delhi : Sangeet Nataka Akademi, 1980.
10. The later Yakshaganas, when performed by hereditary performers and contain stories about Gods, are called 'Bhagavatham'. If a 'Bhagavatham' is performed in the street, i.e., in the open, usually before a temple, it is called 'Veedhi (Street) Bhagavatham'.
11. A 'duruvu' is a situational song, an action song. Supposed to have been drawn from the word *dhruva* as depicted in *Natyasastra*, the Telugu *daruvu* has a wider application than in the original Sanskrit and gives scope for *nritta*, *nriya* and *abhinaya*.
12. The three 'types' are : plays translated from Sanskrit, from English and 'Original' plays.
13. It is doubtful that Korada's play was the first play of modern Telugu dramatic literature since no authentic details are available. The date seems to have been fixed more on conjecture than on facts.

14. In Andhra this association was called "Dharawada Nataka Samajam". The original name, however, is "Tantipurastha Nataka Samajam". It is said that in Kannada "Darawada" means "Tanti Pura" and hence "Tanti Purastha Nataka Samajam". Vide, H.K. Ranganath, *The Karnataka Theatre*, Dharwad : Karnatak University, 1960. pp. 88-89.
15. These two stylistic inclusions (later critics thought they were intrusions) are poems rendered with elaborate *raga* and songs - situational songs - often to depict the individual character's mental disposition at that time of singing. The poem (padyam) has only *raga*; the song has both *raga* and *laya*.
16. The details regarding Parsi Theatre are mainly taken from Somnath Gupt's *The Parsi Theatre : Its Origins and Developments* (translated and edited by Kathryn Hansen) Calcutta : Seagull, 2005.
17. The Gubbi Company, founded by Gubbi Veeranna, was a trend-setter of the practices originally implemented by the Parsi Theatres. For a history of the Gubbi Company, see Sindhuvali Anantha Murthy, *Theatre Movement in Karnataka* (translated into English by L.S. Seshagiri Rao), Mysore : University of Mysore, 1985.

II

Origins of Surabhi

Surabhi people are of Maharashtrian origin and spoke a dialect of Marathi called “Aare”. It is a spoken dialect without a written alphabet. In Andhra they are called “Aare Marathis” or “Aare Kshatriyas” since they originally belonged to the Kshatriya community. It is believed that they had emigrated from Maharashtra centuries back and settled in different parts of Andhra and became one with the Telugu people.

The Aare people’s migrations to Andhra, though started much early¹, had taken place on a large scale when some of these Kshatriyas accompanied Sivaji II, son of Sivaji the great, when he was crowned the king of Thanjavur² and served him and his successors with devotion and love. When the Marathi kingdom in the South fell, the Kshatriyas took to agriculture as their main occupation and settled in several Andhra villages. Because of their valorous heritage, many aare people were appointed “village protectors” – called ‘Nayaks’, also called “Palegandlu”. Many villages employed them as “nayaks” because they were trustworthy. They were soliders during war and peace-loving farmers during other times. Mother Bhavani was their Goddess. They were all Saivites, though some of them in the bordering districts of Maharashtra – especially Adilabad and Nizamabad, embraced Vaishnavism (of the cult of Shri Chakradhara Swamy)³. Some Aare

people were known to have migrated to Andhra even by 11th and 12th centuries and some of them founded kingdoms and many others prospered under royal patronage. The first poet who referred to the word “Aare” was Palkuriki Somanatha, a Saivite poet of the early 13th century, in his *Vrishaadhipa Satakam*. Even in his *magnum opus*, *Panditaradhya Charitra* there are a few Aare couplets transcribed in Telugu. Somanatha was the first to invest the word “Aare” with linguistic, regional, and religious connotations. Thus their migration must have taken place much before 13th c. and it is interesting to note that the present Aare language, as spoken by the settlers in Andhra, contains many ancient linguistic subtleties not to be found in modern Marathi. Poets like Koravi Goparaju (15th c.) and Ponnakanti Telaganarya (16th c.) used the word “Aare” as an index of a race and of language⁴.

There is no script for Aare language. Many families belonging to this sect in Andhra speak chaste Telugu outside their homes and converse in Aare at homes even today. However, their cultural heritage had become one with Telugu culture. It is these Aare people, settled all over Andhra, that had taken to different professions when their main occupation of serving the army had ceased to employ them. Some of these families settled down in Bellary and the neighbouring districts of Rayachur, Ananthapur and Mysore. The ancestors of Surabhi people were some of those settlers near and around Mysore, who migrated later to bordering Andhra districts and were agriculturists.

In mid-19th c. many of these ‘Aare’ people were employed by the British to suppress the “Pindari” onslaught on Rayalaseema. The British government was pleased with their performance and gifted several acres of land in lieu of their services. One of the major families that was benefited by British munificence was the “Vanarasa” family and its kith and kin, and families of its immediate relatives. This gift document is said to be in the family of one Vanarasa Venkoba Rao, who settled down in Karimnagar, having migrated from Bellary, long ago.

The Vanarasa and other 'aare' families, in course of time, grew so large that they migrated to different places in Andhra. Three such branches can be identified⁵: one, the family that settled down in the Rayalaseema area and came to be called the 'Surabhi' branch; the second one is the 'Ramadurgam' branch and settled down in the Telangana area as agriculturists; and the third one is the 'Balakonda' branch, settled originally in northern Telangana adjoining Maharashtra, several of its members going to Bombay in the 1930's to find jobs in the newly-emerging cinema industry. The "Surabhi" group, mainly consisting of the Vanarasa families and their nearest kith and kin was the only one that remained in the area of theatre and related areas of performing arts.

Vanarasa Sanjeeva Rao, the earliest known Ancestor

Sanjeeva Rao and his elder brother (whose name is not known) were the earliest known ancestors of the present-day 'Surabhi' group. They inherited a small piece of land and the two brothers tilled the land and lived on the produce. In addition, Sanjeeva Rao also started a small liquor shop to augment the finances of the family. But he soon took to drinking, to the consternation of his elder brother's family and dismay of his own large family. The more apathy to his drinking shown openly by his relatives, the greater was his indulgence. He also became sensitive to criticism. It was said that during one of the encounters with his brother's family, he was so angry that he gave away his rights on the family property. Added to this, he often joined in petty brawls in the village. Once, when the area was badly hit by drought and people in a congregation mentioned that the God of Rain could perhaps be appeased by human sacrifice alone, Sanjiva Rao came forward and vowed to sacrifice himself if that would help ease the drought situation in the village. To fulfil his vow and to save the vilage, he immolated himself.

But the large family was virtually thrown on to the roads. Sanjeeva Rao had two wives and ten children. By his elder wife,

Channamma he had six sons and a daughter – Ramaiah, Subbaiah, Veeraiah, Krishnaji, Venkoji, Ramoji and Ammannamma. His second wife, Anjanamma, had two sons and a daughter – Kondaiah, Krishnaji and Hanumakka. Since two sons were christened “Krishnaji”, the first one was called ‘Peda’ (elder) Krishnaji and the second one was ‘China’ (younger) Krishnaji. Similarly there were two Ramaiahs among Channamma’s sons. In addition, a young boy was adopted later, whose name also was Ramaiah. So to distinguish the three Ramaiahs, the eldest of the sons of Sanjeeva Rao was known as ‘Modati’ (first) Ramaiah, the last son by Channamma was called ‘Peda’ Ramaiah and the adopted son of Krishnaji was ‘China’ Ramaiah.

Puppetry as Profession

With the sudden and unexpected demise of Sanjeeva Rao, the entire burden of bringing up the children rested with the two widows – Channamma and Anjanamma. The eldest of the sons, Ramaiah, now in his teens, helped the family. The family lost the share of the combined family’s small land holding and also the business of Sanjeeva Rao. The three elder brothers were seeking various job opportunities as farm labour. Three of the younger brothers of Channamma – Krishnaji, Venkoji and Ramoji – had some leanings towards music. They were also adept in playing the musical instruments and singing. They were attracted towards an art which was very popular in their days – Tolu Bommalata, the Shadow Puppet Play. That was the only entertainment in the villages in those days and it attracted both the young and the old. The three brothers were fascinated by it and often indulged in singing the songs when they went home after a performance. They now decided to make it as their profession. The mothers and the three elder sons did not oppose, though the latter kept themselves away from participating in the shows, partly because they had to work hard to make a living and the profession was not dependable, and partly because they did not have any expertise in any of the skills the profession demanded.

Shadow Puppet Theatre⁶

Bommalata (Puppet play) was a popular entertainment in Andhra since very early times. Tolu Bommalata (Leather Puppet Play), the most popular among the three types of puppetry, is a complex form, for it demands fine skills of manipulation accompanied by high quality of singing. For a long time, its performances had enjoyed a ritualistic obligation in a village since the villagers believed that a puppet show during the Ram Navami festival was auspicious and would bring rains. Such performances became a social and ritualistic necessity especially in times of drought.

The puppeteers performed stories from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, occasionally adding stories from local legends, which are extensions of the epics such as *Lakshmana Moorcha* and *Mairavana*. They were itinerant players moving from village to village, carrying their puppet box, trekking the distance by foot. Staying under a tree or a local chowtry, they performed shows for a week and go round the village on the last day for alms and gifts from benevolent householders.

A puppet team is usually made up of a single family – the husband, wife and children. If there are ‘big’ programmes (which means, ‘prestigious’ programmes offering substantial remuneration), their nearest relatives who were adept in the art joined them. The team’s greatest asset was that all the performers belonged to one family, or an extended family of brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles. It was this quality that later helped the Surabhi artists, who were, for over two hundred years, earned their livelihood through puppetry and later, by a single person’s adamant pursuance, took to theatre and lived together as they belonged to one family.

When the Vanarasa family finally took up puppetry as their profession, they learnt the art assiduously and soon became a leading team in the districts of Bellary, Anantapur and Kadapa. The three elder brothers did not like the itinerant nature of the

profession and kept themselves away. Channamma accompanied the other sons and daughters and was a great source of strength to the young, aspiring puppeteers. Each one of the three brothers specialized in the three areas of puppetry. While Krishnaji became a 'mridanga' player, Venkoji became an expert singer and Ramaiah was an avowed 'tala' player, who also led the team in song and manipulation. They also had an asset in Ammannamma, known as Ammanni, a singer whose voice attracted large audiences. Besides, Papabai, the daughter of the second brother Subbaiah, a girl of ten, chose to be a member of this performing group of her uncles. She was a meritorious singer, whose sonorous voice already received encomiums from several luminaries – at a tender age of ten! Papabai was to be an important functionary in the next fifty years – as a puppeteer-singer⁷, as a part of the first theatre group of the Surabhi people, as the first woman on modern Telugu stage, as the first actress that went abroad for performances and was greatly applauded and honoured. She was also a proud mother, and later a grandmother, of a long line of actors whose theatre group was to gain importance as one of the respectful Surabhi groups. Eversince she joined the group, Peda Ramaiah adopted Papabai, his brother's daughter and looked after her as his own daughter. Thus, Subbaiah's daughter became the adopted daughter of Peda Ramaiah, and became a part of the Vanarasa performing group⁸.

The members of the Vanarasa group acquired expertise in puppet-making also. Venkoji soon became known for this art. He has an extreme sense of colour and ornamentation and keenly observed temple sculptures to obtain knowledge of dress, crowns and ornaments which brought beauty to the figures. His style of making the puppets was followed by others for a long time. The major figures in Ramayana prepared by Venkoji were drawn mainly on the model of the figures of the Anjaneya Swamy temple at Gandhi in Kadapa district and continued to inspire later puppet makers.

The family chose Kadapa district as their major area of performances as they were in great demand in that district. In 1875, when they were giving a show in a village called 'Kayalapalli' in Kadiri taluq of Kadapa district, a young Reddy gentleman, Kochervu Gangi Reddy by name, introduced himself as a lover of the art form and evinced keen interest in them and their art. He followed them to the next camp and proposed that he liked the young girl Papa Bai and wanted to marry her! She was hardly twelve years old.

The family was shocked. Peda Ramaiah, who adopted Papa Bai, did not know what to do. They put forward several objections : they were poor; they were nomads without a home ; they could not offer any money ; they were much below the social and financial status of the Reddys. They were also afraid that their major benefactors in the villages were all Reddy-s and would not venture to attract their ire by conceding to this marriage. They also pleaded with him that they were not of Telugu origin and their elders would not permit such an alliance.

Gangi Reddy countered all their objections. He did not have close relatives to object to this match. He did not mind marrying below his social status. In order to convince the Vanarasa family, he changed his name as Aveti Gangaiah, thereby adopting the family name of Papa Bai's maternal uncles (a facility that would enable him to marry Papa Bai, as marrying a maternal uncle's daughter is a prevailing custom in Andhra). Gangaiah finally convinced the elders, married Papabai and lived with the family thereafter and was of great help to the family. In fact, this was the first of the marriages in Vanarasa family, by which a helpful son-in-law followed in the foot-steps of the in-laws to enrich the family traditions. There were many to follow later; but all of them were within the four Surabhi families.

The Vanarasa puppeteering group received accolades from one and all. The group had not only acquired perfect skills, but there were new entrants as the three brothers got married. This big

family divided the characters behind the screen according to their abilities. Aided by good music, expert manipulation, excellent singing by Ammani and Papa Bai and supported by the three daughters-in-law, it naturally was a welcome group in the rural areas of Kadapa district.

When the family was giving performances at a village, Hanumadgundam, in Kadapa district, it came across an orphan boy, Pakeeranna, afflicted with small pox. Channamma took pity on the boy, took him home and nourished him. On the advice of Channamma, Venkoji, who did not have children by that time, adopted the boy as his foster son and christened him, Govindappa. This boy, in later years, was to be the founder of the Surabhi theatre and earned for himself the title of “Andhra Nataka Kalodharaka” for his services to Telugu theatre! A few years later Krishnaji adopted another boy, whose name was Ramaiah, and from now on was called ‘China Ramaiah’ to distinguish him from his uncle ‘Peda Ramaiah’. Like his other adopted brother, Govindappa, China Ramaiah showed great potentialities in all aspects of play production in later years.

Govindappa’s Early Years

When he was found by the Vanarasa family, Govindappa was about nine years old. Originally belonging to the Setti Balija caste, the young boy (Pakeerana was the name given to him by his original parents), was the son of Jampa Ramanna and Pakeeramma. They were farm labour, but due to severe famine during the time, they had no work. However, the British government enlisted them as labourers in road construction at Hanumadgundam, now underway. Unfortunately, both the parents died within a short span of time due to cholera and Pakeeranna was left an orphan. A cook with the British engineer in charge of the road works took pity on the boy and fed him until the boy found a job in a merchandise shop. However, the boy was afflicted with small pox, and so lost his job and was wailing by the side of the road when Channamma found him. Channamma’s

son Venkoji and his wife Suntamma took the boy under their care and adopted him as their son.

Govindappa slowly got acclimatized to his new environment. He developed deep love and devotion for his parents as well as his uncles and grandmothers. He was also keen to learn the family professional skills. As a boy who came from a different environment and not initiated into the alphabets yet, he was made in charge of the cattle and the produce. Govindappa acquitted himself well there also. He soon got interested in the different aspects of puppeteering and learnt the art of manipulation from his uncles and music from his aunts, who were not much older than himself. After the parents were fully satisfied with his performance skills, they took him with them for puppet shows where he proved his abilities in all the areas of performance.

Though Govindappa immensely liked his (new) kith and kin and the performances as well, there was one thing which he, equally intensely, disliked in their profession! After a given number of shows in a village, the entire family would go from door to door and ask for alms, as remuneration for their shows. Govindappa felt that this was demeaning for a team which proved its artistic excellence for several successive nights! They had to go and beg for alms from every village household, the inmates hailing their performances and spoke appreciatively all the days! He pleaded with his parents and uncles about the denigration meted out to them time and again. The other members of the family never thought that it was demeaning, for every family in this profession did the same. They knew no other way to earn money. Govindappa was not convinced, but had to acquiesce, for he was too young to show them an alternative.

But, when he could not bear the humiliation anymore, the eighteen year old youth ran away from home not knowing what to do, but only conscious of running away from what he did not like.

Govindappa landed in a small town called Nandyal in Anantapur District.

Govindappa's life in a new environment

The night he landed at Nandyal, Govindappa chanced to see a play performed by a local theatrical company, called the Jyothi Subbaiah Company. To his great surprise, he found that it comprised completely of women who sang and acted. He also recognized that these actors were singing songs and poems in the same style as his parents were doing. But there was a difference. They all wore glittering dresses and fine ornaments. They also sang in a new fashion, each character interspersing his or her songs with prose. They also looked very proud. Besides, after the performance, people came on to the stage and started giving money and gifts both to individual actresses (there were only actresses) and the whole team. This was thrilling! "They were also performing in the same way", thought Govindappa. His sisters sang better, but they had to go to each household to beg!! At the very first sight, he fell in love with the stage, the actors, the music and the entire performance!

Jyothi Subbaiah, the proprietor of the company, was a man in his fifties. He belonged to a community called "Kalavanthulu" – devadasis that danced in the temples. He brought together several of the Devadasi women, formed a company and started giving performances in the folk theatre style, which was known as 'bayalata'. People showed such enthusiasm and applauded the show so enthusiastically that young Govindappa was lost in thought and appreciation. Hitherto he was not sure what other occupation he would like his family to take up. This performance showed him the way: here was a show liked immensely by people (who shouted and whistled at every point of interest); here were people who were honoured, respected and applauded. This was exactly what he wanted his people to enjoy for their hard work and for their skills.

After the show was over Govindappa met Jyothi Subbaiah, the proprietor-harmonist, introduced himself as Govinda Rao not as Govindappa, evidently to hide his identity and said that he was an

orphan and requested that he might be allowed to be in the company to do any job assigned to him. Govindappa's entreaties were so convincing and his words so pleasing that the proprietor took him into his company as an errand boy.

Govinda Rao's Apprenticeship

Govinda Rao, as he was known at the time, availed every opportunity while he served Jyothi Subbaiah's company. He would take only one meal a day lest his boss should think that he ate much and so dismiss him. He learnt the art of stitching costume, making necklaces with coloured glass pieces, making wigs and crowns. More than these, he liked the way actors did their make-up with zinc powder and *ardalam* which glittered and gave a glowing hallowness to the face. Against the oil lamps, the faces of the female characters looked like those of angels. They looked like the queen figures in his puppet box!

Govinda Rao already knew a few ragas and he learnt more. He was assisting the company by playing violin or mridangam, whenever needed. But the most thrilling experience that he had was when he appeared on the stage, first in small roles but later as Viswamitra in *Satya Harischandra*. He remembered how his uncle Krishnaji would speak as an angry saint and sang songs as he did! He acquitted himself very well in the role.

Govinda Rao was in Nandyal for less than an year. Meanwhile his parents were constantly searching for him. They at last came to know about his whereabouts and arrived at Nandyal. Govinda Rao made his position known. While he was more than willing to go back to parental affection, he did not like to go back to a profession which demanded begging as a part of sustenance. Venkoji and Ramoji conceded part of his request not to force him to go into post-performance alms-begging situation, while the young sensitive Govinda Rao accepted to participate in the puppet shows, but demanded that the family should concede to shift to dramatic performances whenever an opportunity arose.

More than the parents' entreaties to Govinda Rao, their fight with Jyoti Subbaiah proved to be more irksome. What followed was a real life climax. Venkoji and Ramoji who came to fetch him away had difficulties with Jyoti Subbaiah, who did not want to lose such a multi-talented young man like Govinda Rao who was more than willing to work and pleaded with the parents that he had already put in much money on him. but the parents were unrelenting. There was a big fight and sharp words were exchanged. However, on being threatened of dire consequences, Subbaiah allowed Govinda Rao to leave.

When they came back, the brothers consulted their mother and all of them together thought that a solution to retain Govindappa with the family was to marry him off. The bride selected was Subbamma (later known as Peda Subbamma), the daughter of Kochervu Gangi Reddy, alias Aveti Gangaiah, by another wife, Govindamma. Govinda Rao agreed, as that would please his parents and the entire family. There was tentative truce. Govinda Rao was participating actively in the puppet shows, using some of the theatrical techniques he had learnt at Nandyal in rendering the dialogues. The family did not ask him to join in alms collection tours in the village.

First Stage Production : *Keechaka Vadha*

The puppet team of the Vanarasa family had become very popular. Their shows became a part of any important ceremony either in village festivals or ceremonies in big families of rich landlords. From a village near Jammalamadugu, there came a call to enact a puppet show during a wedding ceremony in a rich Reddy landlord's house. The village was Sorugu, which is now called Surabhi, and the landlords were Allapureddy Chenna Reddy and Kovuru Rami Reddy (the former's daughter is given in marriage to the latter's son) who were known in the taluq for their munificence and were known patrons of puppet shows.



Allapureddy Chenna Reddy who was instrumental in founding the Surabhi Theatre

Allapureddy Chenna Reddy's ancestors were said to be the founders of this village. Chenna Reddy was the landlord of the village and had considerable influence in the district. He also won appreciation from the British officials for his honesty and munificence. Besides, his relatives and cousins in the district, all of them wealthy land owners, regarded him as their leader. His kith and kin in the neighbouring villages like Gundluru and Parlapadu wielded immense influence in the area.

Peda Ramaiah, the leader of the group, being a man of pleasing manners and shrewd entrepreneurship accepted the invitation from the Reddy-s and selected the episode of "Keechaka Vadha"⁹ from the *Mahabharata* to be presented on the occasion, which was one of their most sought-after performances. When the idea was discussed in the family, Govinda Rao thought that they got the right opportunity to give a theatrical performance - his life's ambition. He came out with the plea that they should perform a drama, instead of a puppet show, on the wedding occasion. Everyone was aghast. How would it be possible? What did they

know about drama? Govinda Rao explained that what all they had to do was to perform before the curtain and render the same dialogues instead of behind the curtain. He also explained that the same puppet play, 'Keechaka Vadha' could be done as a play. They had, in fact, an advantage. Everyone knew the entire text and so learning a new text did not arise. Besides, the practice in puppet shows which insisted that men sang for and manipulated the male puppets and females the female puppets came in handy. The question of playing the musical instruments could not be solved, for if everyone was on the stage who would provide the backstage music which was so essential. Govinda Rao said that whoever was free would wield the instruments. Since group singing after a line of a song (called 'vantha') does not arise, all the women could take their roles without difficulty.

Only the women were apprehensive. They did not act before. It was an important occasion – a wedding in a rich Reddy landlord's family. What would happen if they failed? Peda Ramaiah came to Govinda Rao's rescue. He said they would take the risk as the man of the next generation desired it so much. He also took it upon himself to inform the Reddy-s and seek their permission.

When the Reddy-s also showed enthusiasm, the matter was clinched. The Reddy women were more than enthusiastic; they were proud about the coming event. In the entire taluq, no one sponsored a dramatic show for a wedding! They sent word to their relatives. The entire village was eager to see a play on the occasion of the wedding of their landlord's daughter.

As the elders of the village remember, the year of the wedding was "Pardhiva-nama Samvatsara" according to the Indian Calendar which synchronises with the year 1885 in the English calendar. The bride was China Subbamma, the daughter of Chenna Reddy and Akkamma, a girl of ten at the time. The elders, the second generation descendants of the Allapureddy and Kovuru families narrate stories of grandeur that accompanied the wedding¹⁰.

Chenna Reddy, his wife Akkamma, daughter Subbamma and son Subba Reddy. It is during the daughter's wedding (six years later) that *Keechaka Vadha* was performed.



The year was 1885. Telugu Theatre was just shaping itself under the ardent leadership of Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu. The influence of the Dharwada Nataka Samajam from Dharwad, which toured a few important towns, was just being felt all over and scores of theatre groups were springing up all over Andhra. In another corner of the Madras Presidency – Bellary - Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu was experimenting both in Kannada and Telugu his version of the Telugu play - a musical play which is called “Padya natakam” (‘Poem Play’, to be exact)¹¹ – an off-shoot of the recitative and dramatic traditions prevalent in Andhra and which was to reign the Telugu theatre for the next half a century.

And quite silently the first professional, family theatre was emerging – as silently as a flower would blossom from a bud or as unaware as a butterfly emerged from a caterpillar. With the financial backing of the Reddy-s, with the assistance of the Reddy household in supplying sarees, ornaments and blankets for

curtains and dresses and with the enthusiastic support of the Surabhi villagers, *Keechaka Vadha* was performed successfully and the Surabhi theatre was born.

Keechaka Vadha is an episode from the 'Virata Parvam' of the *Mahabharata*. The episode described how the five Pandava princes along with Draupadi entered the royal court of king Virata *inognito* and how Keechaka, the powerful brother-in-law of the king, made amorous advances to Draupadi and how finally Bhima killed Keechaka in a nocturnal duel. The play was a popular one in the puppet play repertoire. It gave chance for excellent song sequences and exciting fights. As the nucleus of the text was the puppet text itself, *Keechaka Vadha* was a play with songs, poems and rhetorical prose and gave excellent scope for acting.

The cast was decided on the same lines as in the puppet show. Elders who were hitherto manipulating the respective puppets did the same roles. Govinda Rao was particular that the elders did the major roles.

The following was the cast in the first ever performance of the Surabhi group in their play, *Keechaka Vadha* in 1885:

Keechaka	: Krishnaji
Bhima	: Peda Ramaiah (Ramoji)
Dharmaraja	: Venkoji
Virata	: China Krishnaji
Brihannala (Arjuna)	: Vazeerappa (Peda Ramaiah's son)
Nakula	: Govinda Rao
Sahadeva	: China Ramaiah
Sairandhri (Draupadi)	: Papabai
Uttara	: Ammannamma
Sudheshna	: Hanumakka (?)

Govindappa alias Govinda Rao played a key role in the entire process of the performance. With his experience at Nandyal, he

visualized the show, presided over its implementation and, with the help of the elders, put his ideas into practice successfully.

The performance was an instantaneous success. This was partly due to the singing capabilities of the cast and partly due to the fact that women played female roles and there was no theatre group that ventured to do so in Andhra at that time. There were one or two all-women groups which performed traditional Bayalata plays, but there was no theatre group, wherein men played men's roles and women played female roles. This was also a turning point in the history of the Vanarasa family for the occasion transformed the 'Aare' puppeteers to Surabhi actors!

The play was witnessed by a large group consisting of not only the relatives and friends of the Reddy family, but also of officials of the district under British rule who were administratively connected with the Reddy-s. T.N. Govindarajulu Naidu, Sub-Magistrate of Pulivendala Taluq, witnessed the play and congratulated the patrons and the performers as well. He complimented especially the actresses for their musical talents. He also suggested that the Reddy-s must keep the team members in their village, adopt them, give them the necessary help and see that the group earn laurels for themselves and their patrons. There was appreciation from all quarters. The women of the Reddy family found it unbelievable that a woman, even if it is in the role of Sairandhri could go so near Keechaka or even her stage husband Bhima and talk to him so intimately. They felt elated when the village women complimented them profusely.

The Reddy-s took the Sub-Magistrate's advice seriously, because they also were pleased with the performance and felt that helping the team to sharpen its performance skills was to elevate their own social and political status. They immediately called the elders and told them what the general public and officials felt about the play and proposed that they make Surabhi their home and promised to provide all help. The Vanarasa brothers and their kith and kin, after a long deliberation, welcomed the proposal because

that would also mean their nomadic life would henceforth come to an end.

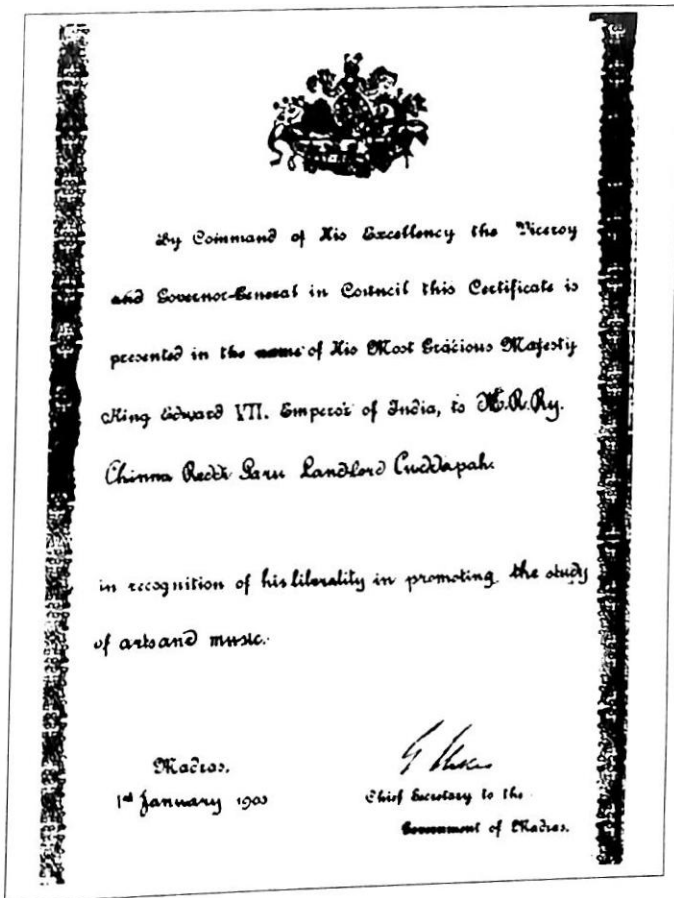


The dilapidated house at Surabhi built in 1886-87

The two patrons gave house sites to the puppeteering families. They also got a big building constructed for them in which the central hall had fittings of mirrors on all the four walls to enable them to observe themselves while rehearsing the plays. They also procured some programmes for them in the neighbouring villages. When once they settled down at Surabhi Govindarajulu Naidu invited them to perform in Pulivendula. People started to designate them as the Vanarasa family of Surabhi. The Vanarasa family and the other relatives (especially, the Aveti and Rekandar families) showed their gratitude to the two Reddy families and the people of Surabhi by adopting the name of 'Surabhi' as their common family name. The word "Surabhi" also distinguished these families from other non-theatre families. From that day onwards, these puppeteers became theatre people and along with their own 'Family Name' Surabhi also became another, common Family name. For example, people belonging to the four families - all of them cousins and maintained marital relations, Vanarasa, Aveti,

Sindhe and Rekandar - started using "Surabhi" as their common identifying family name along with their individual family names like Vanarasa, Rekandar, etc. One helped to identify who they were within the society and the other helped to separately distinguish one family from the other among their own are families.

From the moment of their settling down at Surabhi, the families became to be identified as belonging to "Surabhi theatre" group. "Surabhi theatre group" is perhaps the only community theatre group which adopted a village name as its prefix, like the "Kuchipudi" dance tradition!



Citation given to Sri Chenna Reddy by the British Government in appreciation of his services to Art and Music (From the Revenue records of Cuddapah district and personal records of the family)

NOTES

1. Pervaram Jagannatham, "A Cultural Study in [sic.] Aare Folk Songs," from his book, *Aare Jaanapada Geyalu*. Warangal : Aare Jaanapada Vangmaya Parisodhaka Mandali, 1987. n.p.
2. P.S.R. Appa Rao, *Telugu Nataka Vikasam*, 1964.
3. Pervaram Jagannadham, *op.cit.*
4. Ibid.
5. P.S.R. Appa Rao, "Surabhi Nataka Samajamulu", *Telugu Swatantra* (July 25, 1959), p.3.
6. For details of the history and performance techniques of the Shadow Puppet play, see M. Nagabhushana Sarma, *Tolu Bommalata : The Shadow Puppet Theatre of Andhra Pradesh*, New Delhi : Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1980.
7. Pisupati Chidambara Sastry, "Testimonials of Sree Sarada Manovinodini Sangeetha Nataka Sabha, Surabhi," p.11. Sri Sastry praised the acting prowess of Papabai, both in the male and female roles, in two poems.
8. H.O. Hardinge, a British revenue official, writes : "I witnessed [a] performance by the Mysore Dramatic Company, now called Sarada Manovinodini then under the management of Messers Venkayya & Ramayya. Last night there was first some music which was very pleasant. (*Testimonials*, dated 11.03.1899).
9. Gundlur and Surabhi are to be two villages in which the important Reddy families are related to each other. As A. Chenna Reddy of Surabhi received patronage from the revenue officials, so did his relative Avula Balaiah gari Krishna Reddy, son of Rami Reddy (see the letter of Harold Stuert, Ad. Chief Curetary to the Govt. of Madras, dt. 12th Dec., 1911, quoted in the *Testimonials*, p.6).
10. The elders of the village with whom I had a long interview mentioned the year according to the Indian Calender. They did not know the English year. The English year 1885, as the year of marriage, was confirmed by A. Chinna Reddy's great grandson, Jayaprakash Reddy who stays in Bangalore. He could not, however, give the date of the wedding.
11. For details of the history and performance techniques of "Padya Natakam," see M. Nagabhushana Sarma, "Padya Natakam : The Musical Play of Andhra Pradesh", *Indian Theatre Journal*, 5 (1990-1991), pp. 61-80.

III

SURABHI: THE INITIAL YEARS

In a short introduction to a thin volume of "Testimonials", containing reviews of early performances and opinions of dignitaries, published in 1918 by A. Papabhai [sic], the then Proprietrix of the first Surabhi company, the Sarada Manovinodini Nataka Sabha, the two patrons – Rami Reddy and Chenna Reddy – wrote about the Surabhi performers thus:

The team of Aare Marathi performers, when they settled at Surabhi at our request, contained a family of eight brothers and four sisters, besides brothers-in-law and their children. It was a group of 50 people, all of them actors. They learnt the art while residing at Surabhi. Their original place was Mysore¹.

This undated "introduction", though short, must be an authentic document of facts, since it came from the two patrons who helped the families to settle down at Sorugu village, which later on came to be known as Surabhi. The documents were published by A. Papabhai, daughter of first Ramaiah, the eldest son of Sanjeeva Rao and was the foster-daughter of Peda Ramaiah and wife of Aveti Gangaiah. She was with her foster-parent, Peda Ramaiah, when the company remained a combined one. She continued to be with Peda Ramaiah until he breathed his last in 1914 in Mettuguda, Secunderabad, while on a visit to the erstwhile Nizam State to give performances.

The details mentioned in the “introduction” are important because they throw light on the origins of the present-day Surabai Theatre groups.

The significant points can be listed thus:

1. The group consisted of 50 people – all of them belonging to one family.
2. There were 8 brothers and 4 sisters along with their brothers-in-law and their children.
3. They settled at Surabhi at the request of the two patrons.
4. They learnt the art after settling down at Surabhi.
5. They originally hailed from Mysore.

This thin volume of “Testimonials,” dated between 1894 and 1913, provides us clues to the early history of Surabhi theatre when it was in its infancy and was newly initiated into theatre, and when the members of the theatre group were practising both leather puppetry and theatre simultaneously for quite sometime and, after being trained in theatre, left off puppetry completely and lived on theatre performances. This period of transition also showed their acumen for good theatricals culminating in their tours within Andhra and finally their visit to Rangoon, the capital city of the then Burma, now Myanmar.

The short “introduction” also throws light on the composition of the Surabhi group. It belonged to one combined family – mainly of Sanjeeva Rao’s sons and daughters by his two wives and their other close relatives, including the brothers-in-law. Ramaiah, Subbaiah, Veeraiah, Peda Ramaiah, Krishnaiah, Venkayya (six sons by his first wife) and Kondaiah and China Krishnaji (by his second wife) were the eight sons. The four daughters were Papabai (daughter of eldest Ramaiah and foster-daughter of Peda Ramaiah), Kamalabai (daughter of Krishnaji and a great actress of the early years of Telugu cinema), Ammannamma (Sanjeeva Rao’s daughter by his first wife) and Hanumakka (daughter by Sanjeeva Rao’s second wife). In addition, the team



Venkoji, who adopted Govinda Rao

mainly consisted of Aveti Gangaiah, the man who married Papabai, Govindayya (alias Govinda Rao, the foster-son of Venkoji) and China Ramaiah (foster-son of Krishnaji). Besides these, there were a few belonging to Aveti, Rekandar and Sindhe families – related to the main Vanarasa family by way of marital relations with the Vanarasa brothers and sisters.

Eversince the family settled at Surabhi at the request of the two Reddy-s, they were encouraged to give performances of their play, *Keechaka Vadha* in the neighbouring villages of Surabhi. But they did not altogether stop their performances of puppetry, partly because puppet shows were more popular and rural people had a religious attachment to the form and partly because the team had to eke out their livelihood on a day-to-day basis and their daily bread came only from puppetry. That even until 1899 they performed puppetry was evidenced from a testimonial given to them by H.O. Hardinge, a British Revenue official, who visited Surabhi and witnessed their performance on 1-3-1899².

They (the Mysore Dramatic Company) gave us a part of the *Virataparvam* acted with puppets. This was excellent both in the manipulation of the puppets &

acting that accompanied their movements... The whole performance was good.

(sd.) H.O. Hardinge

However, the fact that they were performing plays by 1894 could be known by a testimonial given by one V. Srimatsanka Row (dated 12th July 1894) which says³:

I witnessed a performance of Messrs Vanarasa Ramayya & Co., Actors of Mysore. The performance gave me great satisfaction and I think the company deserves encouragement. Ammani, a Miss, sings beautifully and I am sure that as she advances in years she will turn out to be an excellent singer. She reflects already credit on her tutor and relative Mr. Venkayya.

(Sd) V. Srimatsanka Row

It was during this period that the team witnessed plays by eminent theatre groups of Andhra, which were becoming popular, at the instance of their patrons. This included plays by the famous Sarasa Vinodini Sabha of Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu. Chenna Reddy was particularly keen that the Surabhi people should learn the techniques of the new poetic drama ("Padya Natakam" as it was called). The main difference between the new poetic drama and Surabhi's play was that the latter was, more or less, in the form of the rural folk play, Bayalata, with more of songs and less of prose.

The Reddy-s sought the advice of T.N. Govindarajulu Naidu of Jammalamadugu who had already witnessed the play at Surabhi and sponsored it at Jammalamadugu. Naidu said that what the actors needed was a good instructor who would teach them both dialogue delivery and diction. The Reddy-s were in search of a teacher. They requested one Mr. Rama Rao, who came to Jammalamadugu to participate in a dance programme to stay in Surabhi and teach the actors. He conceded their request, heard the actors sing and left immediately without telling anyone. He

must have realized how his talents were deficient compared to those of his actors, who had already had a good grounding in *ragas* and dialogue delivery, though couched in a sing-song style.

The search continued. The team was meanwhile improvising some more plays. In 1889, they found the right man in Raptati Subbadas, an exponent of Harikatha Kalakshepam and eminent singer and actor. He was excellent in singing, was an expert in Sanskrit and Telugu and was closely connected with a theatre group in his native town, Hindupur, in Ananthapur district. When the Reddy-s approached him to come to Surabhi to train the actors, he was reluctant. However, he conceded when the Reddy-s made several visits to him and repeatedly requested him and assured him that he could continue his Harikatha performances.

Raptati Subbadas, the first Director



Raptati Subbadas, who monitored the Surabhi growth

Subbadas, a multi-faceted genius, lived a long life of ninety five years. His life can be divided into three phases. In the first 20 years of the formative period, he learnt music from his mother and started participating in Bhajans. His musical abilities were

soon recognized by the upcoming theatre groups in his native place, Hindupur and he took children's roles in plays and acquitted himself well. He was then influenced by his brother who was, even by then, a well-known Harikatha performer. It was at this stage he came to Surabhi at the request of the Reddy-s and spent four useful years there.

Subbadas' stay with Surabhi was of immense help for the group. He wrote plays for them on the lines of the *Padya natakam* and trained them in theatre music and diction and transformed their entire stage behaviour. The credit for making Surabhi acceptable outside, to a great extent, goes to him.

As he felt that the Surabhi group was on its own and could perform confidently even without him, he went back to Hindupur. A wandering Sanyasi who came to Hindupur taught him 'hatha yoga'. Subbadas, while practising yoga, heard that the gurus in the Himalayas were great experts in 'hatha yoga' and so travelled in the Himalayas for 12 years, was trained in it and was deeply involved in propagating this form of yoga. Harikatha performances and yoga continued until 1920.

Subbadas was also greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's principles of *ahimsa*, *naturopathy*, wearing *khadi*, etc. He started propagating these principles and wrote books and poems on these subjects. He was so deeply involved in the non-cooperation movement that he was chosen to be the secretary of the Taluq Congress committee of Dharmavaram and served in that capacity until 1930.

But soon his spiritual urge became so strong that he left off all his worldly moorings, travelled again to Himalayas and returned after 6 years. In 1936 he started Hatha Yoga Ashram in Hindupur and propagated yoga and naturopathy. During 1920-30 he also started a theatre association, Vani Manovinodini Sabha and wrote and produced a play, *Bhakta Jayadeva*, in which he acted in the main role⁴.

His other works include *Pasu yajjna khandam*, *Atmarama Geyalu*, *Parameswara Satakam* and an authentic biography of Adi Sankaracharya, *Sankara Charitramu*. He passed away in 1964.

Raptati Subbadas was in Surabhi for four years during which time he trained the actors in modern verse drama style and wrote plays in this style for them and donned the major roles in all the plays. By the end of the four years, Surabhi Theatre became a consolidated team of youthful entrepreneurs, full of enthusiasm and energy. While the elders were active, it was the youngsters who took pains to learn the art thoroughly. Govinda Rao led the team of youngsters. Papabai, China Ramaiah, Ammannamma, China Subbamma and others followed.

Raptati Subbadas, a prolific actor-director, wrote three plays for the company – *Harischandra*, *Sarangadhara* and *Sakuntala*⁵ and each one was a great success in the entire region.

Subbadas was an actor of great potentialities and played all the lead roles – *Harischandra*, in the play of the same name, *Dushyanta* in *Sakuntala* and *Raja Raja* in *Sarangadhara* and in turn trained Peda Ramaiah in the lead roles. Music was an important element in the new verse drama. But there was a vast difference between the music of the verse drama and the music practised by the Vanarasa family so far in the puppet plays. Subbadas taught the actors how their singing earlier gave much importance to raga-elaboration without invoking the proper mood. He showed them how the situation, the mood and the music should be integrated. Since they were already well versed in the tala system, they had no difficulty in rendering the songs. Subbadas included several songs in his plays. Since all these were action-songs, he took great care to punctuate the songs with dramatic movement. The dialogues hitherto were only prose renderings of the songs. They were often repetitions or summaries of what was already said through songs. Subbadas taught the art of articulation, with an emphasis on the 'sattvika' elements. Thus the entire music was set to explicate the *bhava* and the import of the situation.

Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha

Since the Surabhi theatre group had consolidated itself in all areas of performance and new plays were brought into the repertoire, Subbadas thought it should have an identity of its own, with a name of its own. He knew that the southern Andhra theatre groups from Bellary had already been popular under the names 'Sarasa Vinodini Sabha' and 'Sumanorama Sabha'. On the same lines Subbadas named the new group as "Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha". The name itself indicates that Subbadas intended that his plays should be entertainers, containing all the elements that make the audience aesthetically delightful. Unlike the northern, coastal Andhra theatre associations which called themselves "Samajams", Subbadas followed the Southern tradition by christening the group as 'sabha' - "Sarada Manovinodini Sabha".

Subbadas also wrote an invocatory prayer for the new group – in order to retain its own identify. The prayer, still sung by all the Surabhi groups as their prayer song, was a prayer in praise of Vinayaka, "Shri Sailaja Suta... Surabhipura Sri Sarada Manovinodini" in *raag Kafi* and *Rupaka taal*. It is unfortunate that Subbadas' signature in the song was later replaced by a general adulation to Vinayaka as "Vighna nivarana".

Besides music, Subbadas taught the actors how to wear costumes, ornaments and turbans, especially prepared for the plays. He even taught the women how to wear saris and waist bands and other ornaments for different stage occasions.

After seeing the stage equipment in the other "Sabhas" and after consulting Subbadas, the Reddy-s provided the Sabha whatever was feasible. Technically—sound Surabhi members, Krishnaji and China Ramaiah, made a collapsible stage. It was a *pandal* with palmyrah leaves covering the top, and thick cloth curtains, woven by the lambadi women, usually called 'pattis', covering all the three sides of the stage. A raised platform at the rear end of the auditorium served as the stage. Govinda Rao prepared ornaments and crowns decorated with glass beads, an art he had mastered at

Nandyal. The Reddy-s also requested two Madras painters – Venu and Ranganayakulu – for preparing painted curtains. Krishnaji learnt the art from them and later taught it to China Ramaiah. Costumes were made in the fashion of those that came into vogue in the verse drama, which in turn, imitated those of the Dharwad and Parsi theatres. Two kerosene luster lights (number 14) were used for the shows, while the Surabhi people used oil-fed hand-torches (called “kaagada”) for their maiden production of *Keechaka Vadha*. Make-up materials were made of chalk, yellow and red ochres and black powder collected from the roof of the kerosene lamps. There was nothing new in the colour combinations since many of these colours (except black) were the same used for painting the puppets. However, there was one difference: the colours were mixed with oil when applied to puppets and they were mixed with water and the paste was used now. Govinda Rao had already proved to be an expert in make-up due to his experience in Jyothi Subbaiah’s company at Nandyal. He helped the others to learn the art.

As this was the age of the Musical Drama, this troupe which had a deep musical knowledge soon came to be recognized as one of the foremost. Added to their histrionic talents and musical prowess, the Surabhi theatre had a unique feature of women playing female roles. In an era when men alone were playing the female roles and female impersonation was a rule rather than an exception, the Surabhi people’s age-old custom of having men for male roles (puppets)” and “women for female roles (puppets)” dictum in their puppet shows, was continued. This was perhaps the singular reason for its immediate success. It caught the attention, interest and appreciation of the audience.

Early Successes

After the initial successes at Surabhi, Jammalamadugu and the neighbouring villages, the troupe went to Rayachoti, the taluq headquarters, to perform their plays. A thatched shed was available to them. They took it on lease and did the shows. It was here in

1890 that Subbadas introduced the ticket system. Their collection for the first night was Rs.100/-, a handsome amount in those days, especially when they, as puppeteers were earning Rs.5/- for the same labour. Peda Ramaiah and Venkaiah divided the amount among all the families equally, which was again an age-old custom, prevalent in all the puppet groups. Sharing of proceeds was only nominal, since they lived together, ate together and performed together.

Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha initially toured several towns of Kadapa district. Jammalamadugu, Rayachoti and Kadapa were the major places where they frequently performed. Within the district they were more popular than the Sabhas of Bellary, which often toured the district. The district tours from 1889 to 1895 gave the Surabhi group both name and money. This was because of three specific reasons: firstly because of their acting and singing capabilities. All the actors donning major roles were good singers. The list included Peda Ramaiah, Papabai, Anjanappa and China Ramaiah. A notable feature of their group was their dramatic presentation of songs in which they dominated all the other troupes of Andhra. The second reason for their popularity was the team's speciality of women playing women's roles. The third important quality was their "unified" production values. In the other troupes there were always two or three important actors and others were generally brought to fill in the roles, whereas the Surabhai group was "a family" group and presented a "unified" production, in which no distinctions of big or small actors was ever made. Besides, the attractive curtains reflecting reality as drawn by Krishnaji and China Ramaiah, attracted the audience.

Peda Ramaiah, the Pioneer

Though Subbadas played the lead roles in the beginning until he trained the other actors, very soon Peda Ramaiah took over the reins of the Sabha and played all important roles including all male lead characters. Govinda Rao played important comic roles. The most important characteristic of a professional troupe lay in



Vanarasa Peda Ramaiah

the capabilities and confidence of each actor to replace any other actor in times of need. This was systematically practised by Surabhi from these very early days. Peda Ramaiah was performing the lead roles of Harischandra, Sarangadhara and Dushyanta, when Subbadas shifted to senior roles like Viswamitra, Raja Raju and Kanva. They also continued the age-old puppet play system of every actor knowing the whole text, which helped easy replacements.

In addition to the four plays they were performing, they also prepared improvised scripts of *Rukmangada* and *Subhadra Parinayam* with the assistance of Krishnaji, who had a flair for writing. These plays were adapted from popular contemporary verse-plays, combined with songs and slokas from traditional puppet texts and epic poems. They performed these plays at Kadapa in the first instance in a hired tent. All the plays went off successfully and the satisfied performers came back to Surabhi after their initial successes.

Tours of the Surabhi Company : 1901-1910

By the turn of the century the Surabhi troupe had attained a mastery over their theatrical techniques. Subbadas had given them the wherewithal and provided them proper direction. Govinda Rao took the lead and had equipped himself and his team with all the innovative and creative qualities that pioneered the momentum in the activities of the troupe. Though he was in charge of the entire process, he left it to his father and uncles to run the daily shows. He was in charge of general administration, choosing of plays and new devices in performance. By the year 1900, it was evident that Peda Ramaiah was ready to take over the reins of the company from Subbadas, who was eager to leave to continue his Harikatha deliberations and the transition was smooth and timely.

The successful strides that the company was making during this crucial period are nowhere better evidenced than in one of the telling and moving letters that a contemporary poet and relative of the patrons, the Reddy-s, had written to Peda Ramaiah, the proprietor of the company. In reply to a letter sent to him on 28-05-1900 requesting him to attend a performance of *Harischandra* at Penugonda, Ayyaparlapati Chemikela Channa Reddy wrote thus in a moving testimony⁶ :

My dear Ramaiah,

Tulasi Reddy conveyed to me the message you wanted him to convey on 28-05-1900. I could not attend the show since I felt people who knew me at Penugonda would laugh at me if I start crying as I did at Proddutur. My brother-in-law Jonnavaram Konda Reddy would have certainly made fun of me for my weak heart. That was the reason why I desisted from attending the show. When Peda Papamma as Chandramati came running to *Harischandra*, I was drowned in sorrow. When she was crying over the body of her son, there was no eye that did not shed tears. I think your acting was by far better than your teacher's. He did not have the same

vigour and sensitive artistry as you have.

I am not a very rich man; otherwise I would have showered on you all the presents you deserved. Your acting and singing and above all the hard work you had put in – I would publicise. The kind of honour you people extend to me whenever I visit you makes me feel embarrassed and speechless. In return to your gracious and generous treatment meted out to me, I will educate your son, Anjaneya (Anjanappa).

I remain, yours

Ayyaparlapati Chemikela Channa Reddy

This moving letter by a literary person in the area who is knowledgeable about the plays of other Sabhas and also about the shaping up of the Surabhi troupe in its initial stages is an enough testimony to the performative skills acquired by the young unit and the hard work they were putting in to make a name and also to exemplify the faith reposed in them by their patrons and the public. From then onwards, there was no looking back. Peda Ramaiah had swung himself into the saddle firmly and led the activities of the troupe with Govinda Rao providing the impetus and steering the group from success to more success.

Between 1896 and 1900, the Company toured Kadapa and adjacent Kurnool and Anantapur districts successfully. From 1901 onwards the troupe scheduled a long programme of tour to the coastal belt of Andhra, which resulted in further consolidation. They performed at Narasaraopet (Guntur district), Guntur, Eluru, Rajahmundry, Visakhapatnam, Vizianagaram and Barampuram (Berhampore, now in Orissa but at that time in Madras Presidency and consisted largely of Telugu population). In each one of these towns, the troupe stayed for a month and a half and usually performed on alternate days.

The first real assertion of identity by the team was with regard to adding new plays to the existing repertoire of five plays. In order

to meet the exigencies regarding the paucity of plays to extend their stay at a place for a longer time, the team itself improvised two more new plays, under the direction and supervision of Krishnaji. They were called *Kantamathi* and *Bhallana Raju Charitra*. Both of them were folk plays, the main themes drawn from Gubbi Company's *Sadarame* and *Bhallana Rajane Kathe* respectively. They saw the plays in Bellary when on a visit and immediately modelled their plays on the two Kannada plays. They performed both the plays in their Eluru camp to raving audiences. Though the later play was withdrawn after the first season, *Kantamathi* stayed with the groups well upto 1950's and was often revived even later. The same story has been dramatized at least thrice for three Surabhi groups in later years. The play has gone into several versions, rewritten with minor changes by each different company separately. The play is about a thief and his mischievous deeds. Comedy runs through the play as an undercurrent and so was popular with the masses. Peda Ramaiah, Govinda Rao and China Ramaiah played the role of the thief by turns, which attracted the audience.

The group was now bold enough to adopt some popular plays in the mainstream theatre. The two plays they selected for the next season were *Rukmangada* and *Subhadra Parinayam*. The former play was modeled on a popular Padya natakam of the same name written by Bethapudi Bhagavantha Rao. *Rukamangada* stayed with the group for a long time. This was one of the plays performed during the 1912-13 season, when the group performed at Madras and Rangoon to packed houses.

The troupe acquired new technical skills wherever and whenever they came across such innovations. At Narasaraopet they saw a gas light with two burners and immediately acquired one. In Guntur, they came across a harmonium used for *sruti* and adopted it immediately after acquiring one from Madras. Until then, they only used a wind pipe made of leather, called "titti", for *sruti*. Venkoji played on the violin for important scenes.

Their performances in Guntur, a place already famous for theatre activity, were an instantaneous success. *The Madras Standard*, dated 14th June, 1901 reporting from Guntur, extolled the efforts of the Sarada Manovinodini Sabha.

THEATRICALS IN GUNTUR

A correspondent writes:- Guntur has for a long time been conspicuous for its dramatic activity. Even so early as 1884, the Guntur Hindu Theatrical Company, familiarly called the First Company, apparently owing to its seniority and its merit has been established and half a dozen other companies have since followed in the train one after another with varying degree of success. The "Sarada Mano Vinodini", a professional dramatic troupe from Surabhi, Cuddapah district, is now in our midst and entertaining the public of Guntur by a series of excellent performances such as *Sakuntalam*, *Harischandra*, etc. Their chief merit consists in their superior talent to expose the emotional side of human nature and to touch the feelings of their audiences. By imitating whatever is best in other's performances and making constant improvements they keep their troupe upto the level of the latest fashion. The company possesses some excellent actors of both sexes proficient in the dramatic art and has secured a large number of appreciative testimonials from collectors and other civilians like Messrs. H.O. Hardinge, R.H. Campbell. As contributing to the value of the Dramatic art, the Company fully deserves the encouragement and patronage they are now receiving.

The Madras Standard, 14th June, 1901

In the rainy season of the same year, the Surabhi Company staged plays in Rajahmundry, a town that nurtured modern Telugu theatre and the home town of stalwarts like Kandukuri

Veerasingam, the founder of modern Telugu theatre and Chilakamarti Laxminarasimham, a well-known dramatic poet. All their performances were received with great enthusiasm. Chilakamarti, writing in his autobiography, *Sweeya Charitra*, says:

During the rainy season of 1901, the Surabhi Samajam came to Rajahmundry. It erected a tent in the Meraka Veedhi and performed its plays. Their plays attracted everyone because in their plays men played men's roles and women played women's roles. In some cases women played even men's roles. This was a great attraction.

During this season several British and Indian officials witnessed the Surabhi plays and paid glowing tributes to their acting prowess. R.P. Campbell, H.O. Hardinge, I. Ghosh and A. Vaidyanath Iyer hailed the team for its wonderful theatrical performances.

The upward journey took them to Visakhapatnam where a social reformist-playwright, Marepalli Ramachandra Sastry (popularly called "Kavi garu") remodelled two of his plays, *Parijathapaharanam* and *Bilhaneyam* written earlier, for the Surabhi troupe, by adding a few songs and changing the scenic order to make them more mass-oriented. During their journey, they rehearsed both the plays. Tadakaluri Kuppaswamy, the music director of Marepalli's "*Kalabhilashaka Samajam*", taught them the tunes and trained them in singing. They had also performed at Srikakulam and Palakonda before returning to Visakhapatnam. On their return journey they performed the two plays in Visakhapatnam. In Srikakulam, they got another new play, *Chandrakantha*, a favourite play of the Parsi Companies, rewritten by a great scholar, Vajjhala Chintamani Sastry exclusively for the Surabhi actors. Both *Kantamathi* and *Chandrakantha* were long favourites of Surabhi actors as well as audiences.

After this tour of almost an year, the troupe came back to Surabhi and stayed there for a short while preparing for their next

tour. From 1901, it became customary for the group to tour for nearly ten months and then rest for a while and move onto the next tour. Usually they rested during the rainy season, which gave them enough time to take up new plays. Govinda Rao was in charge of the planning of these tours, each one of which concentrated on areas hitherto untrodden.

In 1903 the troupe stayed at Machilipatnam, a cultural centre in Krishna district for more than three months. It performed their new plays *Chandrakantha* and *Kanthamati* twenty two times each. Each day the audience swelled so much that in a letter published in the prestigious weekly paper, *Krishna Patrika*, on 18-06-1903, a "lover of drama" bemoaned that the Machilipatnam audience's 'mad love' for Surabhi performances, especially due to their women performing women's roles and more specially due to their *sringara abhinaya*, local theatre groups would soon go without spectators!

During their stay at Machilipatnam, there arose a misunderstanding between the members of the troupe. Both Peda Ramaiah and Papabai walked out of the Company and joined a local theatre group, the Godugupeta Dramatic Association, while the other members performed at Ayyankivari hall. However, after a short while, both Ramaiah and Papabai came back to their parent organization.

This unhappy incident was amply compensated by their acquaintance with a famous musician of Machilipatnam, Garikapati Kotiah Devara⁸, a well-known vocalist and violinist, who gladly accepted the fervent request from Govinda Rao to train some of the youngsters of the Surabhi troupe in classical music so that they would be on a better footing. This would also help the actors to come out of the singing tradition of their ancestral puppet shows. Govinda Rao carefully selected six youngsters (four boys and two girls) who would be of great help for the sabha in future and at the same time would not come in the way of their regular performances.



Garikapati
Kotaiah Devara

The group of youngsters left behind with Kotaiah Devara for training included China Anjanappa (Krishnaji's son), Hanumantha Rao (Venkoji's son), Aveti Pullaiah (Papabai's son), Peda Anjanappa (first Ramaiah's son), Anjanamma (Govinda Rao's daughter) and Bojja Bai (Aveti Venkataswamy's daughter). All these girls and boys stayed at Machilipatnam for nearly 4 years, learning either vocal music or violin and later became proficient either in singing or playing violin.

The 1903-04 season mainly included the Telangana towns of Warangal and Secunderabad, where the team got unprecedented welcome. They staged all their plays, each repeated several times on public demand. Secunderabad was particularly remembered by the group because of the praise showered on the actors both by the general public and the elitist audiences. The audiences of Secunderabad who were exposed to both the Parsi theatre productions as well as those of the Gubbi Company, liked the Surabhi performances better because of their "excellent dramatic acting", and not merely for the singing prowess as seen in Gubbi productions and for the "special effects" of the Parsi plays. The

theatre lovers of Secunderabad honoured each actor of the troupe. Under the presidentship of Dharmavaram Gopalacharyulu, a respected playwright and advocate, Venkubai, wife of Krishnaji was honoured with the title “Janjhuti Venkubai” for her excellence in rendering the raga, “Janjhuti”. It was at Secunderabad that the company, for the first time, saw a Parsi company’s productions. They were greatly impressed by the productions.

In the next season, 1905-06, the group toured the Madras and Mysore areas. In Madras city they performed for over three months and made an everlasting impression on the elitist audiences of the capital city and received laurels and honours. In Madras they saw the local troupes using the harmonium in the pit in the auditorium and not in the side wings and followed the same practice in their own productions as well. In Madras also, they had an occasion to see Parsi theatre productions and in Mysore they saw the Gubbi company plays. This influenced their use of new techniques in presentation. China Ramaiah had captured several technical skills that such trick scenes needed and incorporated them in Surabhi’s own plays.

These annual tours to different parts of South India enhanced the prestige of the Surabhi troupe. It was also benefited by these tours by extending its repertoire. Peda Ramaiah proved to be a great administrator for it was mainly because of him, early consolidation of the company had taken place. He was also a great public relations man. Whoever spoke of him paid compliments to his competence in organizational matters. He was also a celebrated actor, wielding the *veera* and the *hasya rasas* with equal diligence. People showered praises on him, and he was honoured with gold medals wherever he went.

Among the most important achievements of Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha during its first twenty five years with Govinda Rao as the visionary and Peda Ramaiah at the helm of affairs, one must mention that they strengthened the company from being a learner to a proverbially ideal professional theatre group. This was

mostly achieved by Govinda Rao's careful planning which encouraged his fathers and his brothers and sisters to take an active part in the qualitative improvement of the performances. New plays by renowned playwrights were specially got written; technical improvements were made. Peda Ramaiah had the assistance of not only his two brothers, but the active support of three people of the next generation – Papabai, Govinda Rao and China Ramaiah.

By 1910 the family grew too large and unmanageable. So the three brothers agreed to set up three separate units of Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha in three different parts of the State, thus extending an earlier practice – among the puppeteers – to earmark villages for receiving “Varshikam” - an annual remuneration only from those villages or from the allotted areas. By this arrangement, Krishnaji would perform in the Rayalaseema area, Peda Ramaiah in Telangana area and Venkaiah in Coastal Andhra. But they agreed that all family and religious functions must be celebrated together.

The three brothers, though they went their separate ways, called their companies “Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha”. Peda Ramaiah and Papabai continued their tours very successfully. The careful planning of the tours (which he owed to Govinda Rao) gave dividends. In 1912 Peda Ramaiah's company toured extensively from Visakhapatnam and Berhampore to Rangoon. They stayed in Burma for over five months – from July to November and they travelled back to Madras in 1913.

First Trip to Rangoon⁹

The Rangoon trip was a particularly fruitful fare for the Company. They earned money and fame, each one of the troupe members being honoured with titles and gold medals. As evidence goes, the Telugu settlers in Rangoon had had a feast. Besides Rangoon, the capital city, they also gave performances in Moalein, an industrial town where Telugus in large numbers settled down.

The Andhra Mahajana Sangham (49, Mogul Street, Rangoon) welcomed the Surabhi group wholeheartedly. Rai Bahadur

P.M. Madurai Pillay M.R.A.S., Hon'ble Magistrate and Municipal Commissioner, decorated Peda Ramaiah and two actresses with gold medals. M.V. Abdul Rahiman, Proprietor of Cassim Bros. & Co., who was responsible for this trip in his letter dated 10th August, 1912, greatly lauded the company's immaculate performances, presented to packed houses.

The company returned to India via Berhampore (Barampuram). In Berhampur, they not only performed all their plays staying there for two months but also helped local amateur theatre groups by giving their hall free of cost for their performances, when the company was not performing.

The last halt of the group in this tour was at Madras where they gave a series of performances of 15 of their plays in the Victoria Hall. The theatre lovers of Madras, headed by illustrious luminaries like C. Sankaran Nair (High Court Judge), A.C. Parthasarathy Naidu and 30 others publicly honoured the Surabhi actors extolling them for their excellent "theatricals" by which the Madras public was immensely pleased.

The Sarada Manovinodini Sabha started functioning actively in 1889 though the first theatrical performance by the Vanarasa family took place in 1885 itself. It was in a dormant stage for five years, oscillating between the traditional and dependable profession of puppetry and the new, bold and unpredictable theatre activities. However, with the arrival of Raptati Subbadas in 1889, a strong foundation was laid – with an identity, a name, a repertoire of plays and an adventurous tour programme.

Surabhi, in the quarter century of its existence (1885-1910), achieved several marked successes. The first generation Surabhi actors included the three brothers, their wives and their brothers-in-law and sisters. The most notable names that were prominent during this time included Peda Ramaiah, Venkaiah and Krishnaiah, Anjanamma and Janjhuti Venkubai, Krishnaji's wife and Ramabai, Peda Ramaiah's wife. Among the second generation stalwarts were Govinda Rao, Papabai, China Ramaiah and Anjanappa. All of them acquitted themselves exceedingly well both individually and collectively.

Besides asserting itself as a major theatre group, the Sarada Manovinodini Sabha has also proved its credentials as a family theatre, the roots of which lay in the puppet tradition. The team also was moving towards becoming a viable professional theatre. It was still a rural, touring, family theatre group only replacing puppetry with theatre as a profession. But the symptoms are already there with a perfect commercial attitude towards performing and sharing the proceeds among the families equally.

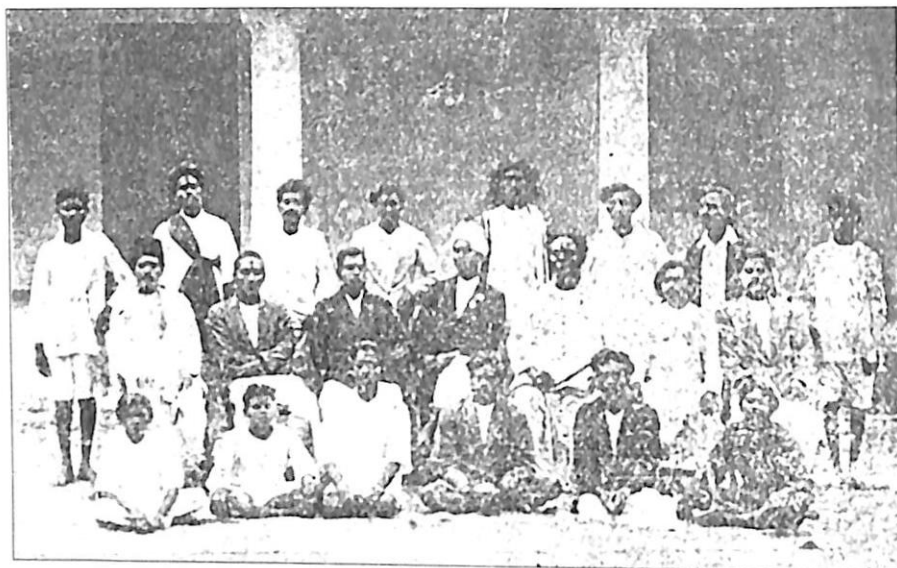
The direction in which the Surabhi Sabha was moving could also be assessed by its careful actions. They did not take up any play that was easily available in the market. Instead, they requested well-known literary figures of the day to write plays for them. Marepalli Ramachandra Sastry, Vajjhala Chintamani Sastry, Pisupati Chidambara Sastry, in addition to Subbadas, were the first writers who specially wrote plays for the group. Chilakamarti Laxminarasimham, a renowned playwright, followed other writers by allowing three of his plays to be performed by the group.

The group also was alert to equip itself with the best of the technical gadgets coming into the market. The two-burner gas light, the harmonium, new curtains, dominating but appropriate costumes and ornaments were some of the new innovations they accepted and implemented during this period. The mechanical stage devices soon became an added attraction.

As excellent reports both from the press and knowledgeable individuals reveal, all the tours undertaken by the Sabha proved to be exceptionally successful. The credit for the success should go – not to any individual, though all the important people had contributed to it, but to the group spirit and family togetherness. Govinda Rao's creative genius, Peda Ramaiah's practical wisdom, Papabai's musical expertise and China Ramaiah's technical knowledge – were assimilated here to build an unusual and unique theatre movement in the next quarter of a century, 1910-1937.

NOTES

1. This is a statement made by Chenna Reddy and Rami Reddy, the patrons. *Testimonials*, p. 13.
2. The letter of H.O. Hardinge quoted above, confirms this. *Testimonials*, p. 16.
3. *Ibid*, p. 15 (the Testimonial is dated 12th July, 1894).
4. Raptati Subbadas, *Bhakta Jayadeva*, Hindupur : Sumana Mano Kusumavali, 1948.
5. Subbadas himself says that he wrote the three plays for the Surabhi people and as the leading actor and director toured extensively, see his "Introduction," (Munnudi") to his *Sri Sankara Saccharitramu*. Hindupur : Sumana Manovinodini, 1962. p.2.
6. This moving letter, which throws light on the acting capabilities of Peda Ramaiah, Papabai and others, dt. 28.05.1900 is an indication that the team had already had wide recognition in Kadapa District and beyond.
Ayyaparlapati Chemikala Channa Reddy is a well - known poet of the district. Besides being a poet, he also wrote a short play in Sanskrit called *Madana Mohana Natika*, Proddutur, 1914.
7. Chilakamarti Laxmi Narasimham, *Sweeya Charitramu*, Vijayawada, Andhra Abhyudaya Rachayitala Sangham, 1944, p. 176.
8. Garikeparti Kotaiah Devara (1861-1924), a native of Machilipatnam, Krishna District in Andhra Pradesh, was one of the reputed musicians of late 19th and early 20th centuries, having attained proficiency both in Hindustani and Carnatic music, the former from well-known musicians in Hyderabad and the latter from several Vidwans in Thanjavur. He was honoured as an *asthana gawai* in Nawab Jaffar Jung Devidi. He was also proficient in Arabic, Parsi and Urdu. Pleased with his mastery over violin and with singing, H.S. Sakaram Maharaj of Thanjavur appointed him as his Court musician. He came back to Machilipatnam and started a music school on March 1, 1896 and trained several musicians.
9. Several testimonials given by eminent wealthy South Indian settlers in Rangoon including P.M. Madooray Pillay M.R.A.S., Hon. Magistrate and Municipal Commissioner of Rangoon and Abdul Rahim of the Cassim Company bear testimony to the fact that the Burma trip was a grand success.



Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali (men)
Founded by Vanarasa Govinda Rao in 1927



Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali (women)

IV GOLDEN ERA : THE AGE OF VANARASA GOVINDA RAO



Vanarasa Govinda Rao,
the architect of the Surabhi
theatre

Eversince the Surabhi people chose to take theatre as their profession, Govindappa or Govinda Rao as he was called later, was at the helm of administration and designed plans to consolidate their theatrical career. In fact, it was at his behest and insistence, that the puppeteers condescended to take a new profession. For long, they did not take it kindly. The fact that it took five years for the group to willingly accept the new avocation was itself a proof of the undecidedness of the seniors in the family

to plunge into an area, as they thought, of darkness and uncertainty. Govinda Rao patiently steered the wheels with tact and conviction. He retained many of the family or hereditary customs to give the elders belief and confidence in his vision. He allowed the elders to have the last say in matters concerning the family, while retaining the supportive authority to move ahead, with caution, with regard to matters concerning theatre activity. He also gave the elders the leadership. From 1889 when the Surabhi group was given a name - Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha - he was the creative head of the group, while Peda Ramaiah, Papabai and China Ramaiah, and for sometime, Venkaiah, were leaders on the field, on the stage. He was always careful not to project himself as the leader; it was not a conscious strategy adopted; but a hereditary practice that he upheld and practised.

The one person who had moulded the destinies of the Surabhi people and the Surabhi theatre was therefore Govinda Rao, foster-son of Venkoji and the eldest of the second generation Surabhi actors, who singlehandedly systematized both the organizational and performative branches of Surabhi. He not only brought the Surabhi clan into theatre, but decided on the plays and characters the troupe and the family members had to take up. He always aimed high and always lived up to others' expectations. He overviewed the needs of the company. Under his aegis, the Sabha became organized ; the tours satisfying.

The three Vanarasa brothers provided the necessary inspiration and willingness to do hard work ; the Reddy-s still backed them and used their good offices to promote their team. They provided assistance for procuring the needs for theatre production. They stood like a rock of strength by the Surabhi team. Subbadas paved the way for the consolidation and progress of the group by channelling their presentational abilities. Govinda Rao took a leading role in systemtizing the working of the theatre group.

Govinda Rao's entrepreneurship steered the Company to great success. Since Govinda Rao was exposed to the outside world

better than the elderly people, he saw several Parsi theatre companies touring Andhra and was greatly impressed by their technical perfection. He frequently came across the performances of the Gubbi Company since 1884 as they often toured the border districts of Karnataka and Andhra. More than anything else, the technical skills of the Gubbi Company reminded him of the Parsi companies and he was thoroughly taken in by them. He started working to create a theatrical atmosphere as he had seen in the Gubbi and Parsi companies. Govinda Rao synthesized this technical expertise with good acting abilities and musical virtuosity as taught by Subbadas. In this he was greatly helped by China Ramaiah, his cousin, and together they took the Company from being an amateur theatre group to a professional one and from a professional theatre to a commercial one. He was also insistent that the family solidarity must be kept intact, as that made Surabhi different from other professional theatre companies.

Govinda Rao's vision and China Ramaiah's technical know-how led them to prepare materials for the construction of a moveable stage and auditorium. The idea of having the Company's own materials helped quick transportation and ready construction. It would take six hours to construct a hall and two hours to dismantle it. The company had several men who could pitch a hall and dismantle it. The earlier practice of covering the side walls of the auditorium with "Lambada pattis", the thick coloured cloth, hand-woven by the Lambada women (a wandering tribe), was now replaced by arranging zinc sheets which provided better protection from wind and rain. Govinda Rao, who was always prone to new ideas, took no time to carve Surabhi into a new and unique organization. In improving the technical skills of the Surabhi people, China Ramaiah took a leading role.

As time went on and tours had become frequent, Govinda Rao introduced a new system of sharing the proceeds of a show. The same system continued for a long time – at least until the Manager-system had set in 1953. Until then it was mainly a combinedly-

owned family enterprise. Even when Govinda Rao's sons and daughters established their own Surabhi theatre groups, they were mainly made-up of one nucleus family with supporting families in the immediate kinship circle.

Govinda Rao divided the proceeds into three units¹. First of all one third of the revenue was ear-marked for "Stage Purposes". This would involve stage equipment, new lights, zinc sheets, furniture, etc. Another one third would go to the "Emergency expenditure". This would include loss due to cyclone and rain, damage to the properties and emergency needs of the members like medical expenditure, etc. The third one goes to salaries. Two types of salary payments were in vogue: Seniors and Juniors. All the seniors formed into one category. Each one of them was paid equally. There was no distinction between an actor who was doing a hero's role and a curtain puller behind the stage. Similarly, all juniors were paid likewise. Juniors were those who were below twelve years of age. They got half the amount paid to the seniors. This system of payments to everybody was borrowed from the family tradition during their days of puppetry.

Govinda Rao was singularly responsible for equipping the theatre with all the technical back-up needed to make it popular with the rural and urban audiences alike. Wherever he saw new gadgets he not only made them available to his company, but with the help of technical experts within the family, like China Ramaiah and Krishnaji, he strengthened the technical side of the performances. Latest lighting equipment allowed special lighting effects possible. Even today these "special effects", mainly based on lighting and design are popular and in recent times have become the main draw. Govinda Rao not only attended shows of the Parsi companies but consistently sent the major actors to see the performances. He did not want any direct imitation; if there was anything worthwhile to follow he would do so depending on the reception his audiences.

Govinda Rao's major concern was the reception of a play by his audience. If tastes changed and a play received less patronage

in two successive camps, he would not mind discarding the play. He also made repeated attempts to invite the best poet-dramatists of his time to write plays for the Company. The playwrights not only provided plays on popular themes with “theatrical” scenes, they rehearsed the plays with the actors and saw the play upto its first production, received a handsome amount as one time remuneration². In spite of remunerations paid, the playwrights were always kept in high esteem and Govinda Rao was ready to help them whenever such help was needed. He helped several needy writers without a third person knowing about it. By thus assimilating several characteristics from different sources, Govinda Rao made the Surabhi Company an ideal theatre organization, ideal family group and equally ideal humanitarian ensemble.

When Peda Ramaiah passed away in 1914 in Secunderabad, Papabhai [sic.] became the proprietrix of the Company. She gave a new name to the Company and called it “Sri Sarada Mano Vinodini Sangeeta Nataka Sabha”, inserting the words “Sangeeta Nataka” into the title. All the testimonials and reviews upto 1913 mentioned the name of “Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha” only. After Peda Ramaiah’s demise, Papabhai published the testimonials and press reports in a tiny volume. The title page contains the name of “Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sangeetha Nataka Sabha”.

All the three brothers, when they divided, called their companies “Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha”. Since the three brothers operated in three different regions, there was no clash of interests. Govinda Rao built his theatre unit on systematic lines. It was because of his careful planning and firm execution that the name of Surabhi had remained to be a synonym for good, well-knit, professional family theatre.

In order to achieve this singular success, two people stand out prominently as his followers, co-visionaries and co-participants to make the vision a reality. It was China Ramaiah who remained



Surabhi Aveti Papabai

with Govinda Rao from 1895 to 1914 and again from 1919 to 1927 and helped Surabhi to stand on its own in technical know-how. The other one was Kothapally Laxmaiah, Govinda Rao's secretary, adviser and life-long friend since 1927. The former was one of his chief advisers from 1889 to 1927 and the latter from 1927 until his death in 1948.

China Ramaiah

China Ramaiah stayed in Papabai's company after Peda Ramaiah's demise in 1914. However, he joined his cousin Govinda Rao in 1919 and stayed with him until 1927 when he started his own company.

China Ramaiah was adopted by Krishnaji in the same way as Govindappa was adopted by Venkoji, when he was about nine years old. He was also an orphan and belonged to Jammalamadugu village of Kadapa district. He belonged to the weaver's community. Krishnaji's wife Naramma who had no children wanted to take the boy into their fold. The boy was looking handsome and healthy; he had in the early days, feminine features. The brothers accepted and brought Ramaiah home. Since Krishnaji's brother was also named Ramaiah, now called Peda Ramaiah (the 'elder' Ramaiah), this boy was called China (younger) Ramaiah.



China Ramaiah

China Ramaiah started his theatrical life by doing small roles like Lohitasya and then female roles like Satyabhama, Kalahakanthi (in *Harischandra*) and one of the two Matanga Kanyas in *Harischandra*. In later years, however, he took up all the characters of the ferocious type – Hiranya Kasipa (*Bhakta Prhlada*), Yama (*Sati Savithri*), Krurasena (*Kanakatara*) – and the thief in *Kantamathi*. According to contemporary accounts, he was considered a great actor, equally felicitous in *rajasa* and *tamasa* roles³.

China Ramaiah was also adept in handling technical equipment. As early as in 1904, he introduced the “tricks” in their plays after seeing them in Parsi company performances. In 1924, at his instance, Govinda Rao bought the first dynamo for his company and China Ramaiah operated it and taught the technique of operation to other backstage people. China Ramaiah saw a full-fledged hall made of zinc sheets, when the Baliwala Company toured Andhra and performed at Kakinada and Rajahmundry. He immediately made Govinda Rao construct a similar tent with zinc sheets. The design now followed by the Surabhi people in constructing a playhouse was China Ramaiah’s under the supervision of Govinda Rao.

Another important area in which both the brothers – Govinda Rao and China Ramaiah – operated together was in selection and commissioning playwrights to write plays exclusively for them. When once the playwright was selected by Govinda Rao, China Ramaiah sat with him and saw that the play had all the ingredients that would suit their company and ensure success. Ramaiah also helped to conduct the rehearsals with the author supervising. Thus they inducted Malladi Viswanatha Kaviraju, Chakravadhanula Manikya Sarma and Pandita K. Subrahmanya Sastry – all well-established and highly revered playwrights - to write plays for them. They also requested Bulusu Sitarama Sastry, a great scholar-poet, to write a play, “Dasavatharamulu”, the first play on such a grand scale to be written and performed in South India. Varadachary’s *Vishnu Leelalu* and Kannaiah Company’s *Dasavatara* came much later.

As a person China Ramaiah was a gentleman who tried to equip their Company with new tools. As an actor Ramaiah was considered an all-rounder. At his request Viswanatha Kaviraju translated *Mrichakatika* as ‘Vasantasena’ in which China Ramaiah did the role of Sakara to the astonishment of everyone. Thus the multi-faceted actor China Ramaiah strengthened the first Surabhi company both under the elders and also under Govinda Rao. In 1927 China Ramaiah left his brother to start his own theatre company. It became necessary because China Ramaiah’s son Abbaji Rao came of age and also because his brother’s Company was becoming unwieldy with the addition of Govinda Rao’s daughters and sons, daughters-in-law and sons-in-law and their children. Govinda Rao allowed China Ramaiah to use Surabhi’s original name, “Sri Sarada Manovinodini Nataka Sabha” and chose a new name for his own company. However, when China Ramaiah’s son Abbaji Rao took over the company, he gave yet another name to it : Sri Sarada Manovinodini Natya Kala Mandali.

China Ramaiah was also a good painter. He first learnt the art from his father Krishnaji. When two painters from Madras - Venu

and Ranganayakulu – were brought in, he learnt the art perfectly from them. It was China Ramiah that painted the front curtains (called 'ankams') containing the name of the company, a picture of the family deity and other details, for most of the Surabhi companies. When in 1938 China Ramaiah wound up his company, he sold the curtains, zinc sheets used for the tent and the equipment to Baba Rao's Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali⁴.

Kothapally Laxmaiah



Kothapally Laxmaiah joined Govinda Rao when China Ramaiah left him in 1927. Born in 1899 at Bhimavaram to Sangamma and Gurumurthy, Kothapally Laxmaiah had his early education in Bhimavaram and worked as a teacher in a Government school for sometime and later as a clerk in the office of the Inspector of Schools. Even while in school he acted in plays and wrote two plays for children⁵. He came into contact with Govinda Rao in 1918 and was to some extent responsible for Govinda Rao's settling down at Polasanipalli. In 1927 he resigned his job and at the

invitation of Govinda Rao joined him as secretary. Laxmaiah was with his mentor until his last days. He passed away on October 4, 1948.

Laxmaiah was also a noted actor. He acted as Bussey in *Bobbili Yuddham*, a historical play, as Bhairava Sastry in *Mahananda*, a play by Viswanatha Kaviraju, as Vakil Narayana Rao in a social play, *Stree Samrajyam*, by Kopparapu Subba Rao and as Dasaratha in *Sampoorna Ramayanam* - all these plays in Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali, the company started by Govinda Rao in 1927.

Laxmaiah was a P.R. man for Govinda Rao in all the activities that Rao had undertaken from time to time. He was secretary to Govinda Rao, secretary of the Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali and later, when Govinda Rao, along with other stalwarts, started *Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad*, an apex body of theatre lovers in 1929, Laxmaiah became its secretary also. In 1935 when the Parishad started a journal, "*Natya Kala*", he became its editor. He served Govinda Rao as his lieutenant all through his life.

Govinda Rao's Tours: 1910-1917

Govinda Rao continued the same methods of preparing his itinerary as he and his parents had earlier followed. He only made a few structural changes in the format. Earlier the combined company performed in the towns. Now that the area was limited with three teams functioning in three different parts of the state, he had to go to even bigger villages, each village a nucleus of several small villages or hamlets. He also increased the number of working days, performing on alternate days and giving special shows on festival days. Earlier the company was staying at a place only for 20 to 30 days. To remove a camp and erect another camp, it involved a considerably huge sum and so, in order to minimize expenditure, he prepared a more workable tour programme by which arrangement the Company would stay at a camp for not less than 2 months, extending the performances, if need be. He also initiated a new "intermediary" camping system by which he

camped at smaller places in between two 'big' camps. For example, he performed at Ramachandrapuram (East Godavari district) for two months in August and September, 1915⁶. Before moving to another big town, Kakinada, he camped at Jagannadhपुरi, a village 7 miles away from Ramachandrapuram and staged ten plays in twenty days. This enabled the Company members to make suitable preparations at a big camp. Invariably, such camps were sponsored or aided by local theatre patrons.

A long sojourn like the one undertaken by the Company naturally demanded many more plays in store than they ever had. Govinda Rao took care to get new plays written for them keeping in view the potentialities of his members. Besides old plays like *Harischandra*, *Chandrakanta*, *Kantamathi* and *Lava Kusa*, new plays like *Sati Savithri*, *Dasavataaraalu* and *Sampoorna Bharatam* were added now to their old list and were greatly popular. Among the major playwrights who wrote such successful plays for Govinda Rao's company, mention must be made of Malladi Viswanatha Kaviraju, Chakravadhanula Manikya Sarma, Bulusu Seetharama Sastry, the last mentioned writer's *Dasavataaraalu* being the first play in the South in which the lives of all the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu are dramatised. Similarly, Viswanatha Kaviraju wrote or rewrote twelve plays for Govinda Rao, among which *Sati Savithri*, *Harischandra* and *Mahananda* were instantaneous successes.

Govinda Rao was a god-fearing man with a benevolent disposition. He was a life-long devotee of Anjaneya and donated liberally to all temples in and around the places his company performed. He constructed chowtries on the way to pilgrimages and got wells dug up for the convenience of the devotees. He helped needy students, gave liberally to the poor parents for their children's marriages. During his stay at a camp, he would earmark some money for noble causes. He donated liberally to 'National' colleges ('Jaatiya Vidyalayams' started in the wake of the Nationalist Movement) wherever he found one on his way. During one single year, for example in 1921, he made contributions to Seetharama Mandiram in Nuzvid, to the National College at

Tanuku, to the Anjaneya temple at Gandi and to a school in Vuyyur. He would fast for nine days and celebrate Srirama Navami festival on a grand scale. He had given huge donations to the famous Siva temple at Kotappa Konda in Guntur district for Sivarathri festival.

In December 1917 the company was performing at Bhimavaram in West Godavari district. On one Saturday it was performing *Lanka Dahanam* in which Govinda Rao was doing the role of Anjaneya. He had a new outfit for the monkey-god. Though there was a family tradition which insisted that the Surabhi people should not wear new clothes on Saturdays, he wore the new costume specially got ready for the role of Anjaneya on the insistence of the members. In the midst of the show, he was in a trance, uttering the words "Rama, Rama". All of a sudden fire caught up his dress and Govinda Rao was almost burnt to death. His people lost hope. He himself was utterly shocked and prayed to Anjaneya at Gandi that if he survived, he would fast on every Saturday throughout his life. After three months in bed, Govinda Rao was able to do his normal work, but he stopped doing major roles. He still continued to perform with zeal two roles – the thief's role in *Kanthamati* and a basket-weaver's role in *Jayantha Jayapal*. Both are comic roles and needed much expertise in using varying dialects. The company proudly advertised that the Company's Manager would take up the role of a thief! According to knowledgeable critics like V.V.L. Narasimha Rao, a Telugu scholar and playwright from Kakinada, he did this role with impeccable perfection. Besides taking up these roles, he also narrated comic stories and tit-bits during intervals of each play. These "comic interludes" themselves were very enjoyable⁷.

In spite of his major accident, Govinda Rao did not want to stop their travel plans. From Bhimavaram, the troupe went to Tanuku and from there they were travelling to Attili by boat. During their boat journey, on 1-3-1918, on a full moon night Laxamma, Govinda Rao's second wife gave birth to a daughter. Govinda Rao named her as Poornima, who later became a

renowned actress and acted with Bellary Raghava, Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao and other luminaries in the field.

Govinda Rao and his troupe members did not have a permanent home after the brothers separated. Going back to Surabhi was becoming increasingly difficult because since his father's days, the team was performing in Costal Andhra according to an agreement among the three brothers. So he was searching for a good habitat. When he came into contact with Kothapally Laxmaiah in 1917 while he was in Bhimavaram, the latter took him to several villages, with the idea of selecting a permanent home for Rao. Laxmaiah who belonged to the area, took him to a village 22 km. away from Eluru, called Polasanipalli, the native place of Laxmaiah's maternal uncles, which was liked by Govinda Rao.

Both Govinda Rao and Laxmaiah visited the village several times. He liked the place for its serene atmosphere. Polasanipalli is a small village of about 800 houses. It was a Brahmin agraharam once. It was poor and undeveloped. As the local people say the village was originally known as 'Poolasanipalle'. Palle is a small village. The word 'Polasani' is a corrupt word for Poola (flower), sani (a courtesan or devadasi). It is believed that the village was constructed in the name of a courtesan in the court of Pangidi



Govinda Rao's house at Polasanipalli

Zamindar, a small chieftain nearby, who was fond of flowers. They also say that the entire place was once filled with flower gardens belonging to that 'sani'. Though the flower gardens disappeared by the time Govinda Rao decided to buy the land there was a big mango grove. Govinda Rao bought half an acre of land in 1918 and constructed a house there. He moved into the new house on May 8, 1918⁸.

Govinda Rao found that the people in the village were poor. It was mainly a Brahmin agraharam, belonging to the Pullabhotla family, the maternal family of Kothapally Laxmaiah. People were extremely friendly. Govinda Rao renovated the Srirama temple and gave ample funds for its daily rituals. He rehabilitated several shepherds who were residing under the trees on the wayside. As there was no school in the village, he constructed a school in 1919 which started functioning in 1920 and appointed Kothapally Laxmaiah as its teacher and later Somasundaram, Laxmaiah's eldest brother took over. He was so liberal that he admitted Harijan boys into the school after convincing the orthodox Brahmin elders. Finding that the area was drought-prone, he got several wells dug throughout the area. People of the village even today acknowledge Govinda Rao's concern for the villagers and remember him with gratitude. He also wanted to construct a chowtry for the devotees, as the village was on the way from Eluru to Dwaraka Tirumala, popularly called the "Southern Dwaraka", but somehow that did not materialize.

Govinda Rao's munificence knew no bounds. As he improved the quality of the performances of his company's plays he had more income. With more income he spent more money for public causes. This munificence did not stop with Polasanipalli alone. He gave scholarships to needy boys for further education. He helped old and retired actors who were in dire need. He celebrated the marriages of poor couples, many times donning the role of the bride's father. He helped the freedom fighters and also gave donations to the British government during the war years. Constant vigil and disciplined performances of a rich repertoire

was the key to Govinda Rao's success as a Company Manager. Training his sons and daughters (his eldest son Hanumantha Rao was an exception; he was a Municipal Supervisor in Vizianagaram; all others were in theatre); in the art of the theatre and encouraging them to start their own theatre units was his contribution to the development of Telugu theatre in general and professional theatre in particular.

Govinda Rao's method of carving out a part of the property for each of his daughters and sons to start a new Surabhi company was accredited as a role model. It was because of his guidance, training and help that soon there were to be several theatre groups. Spending money for a good cause was Govinda Rao's weakness in life. Until his later years this virtue continued to draw his attention. Though in later years he was not financially sound, he could not withhold this habit of donating his mite for a good cause.

Govinda Rao's Life : 1919-1937 : Surabhi's Golden Era

This period may be considered as the golden age in Surabhi history in general and in Govinda Rao's life in particular. In 1918 Govinda Rao built a house at Polasanipalli and started residing there. His first wife Subbamma would stay there looking after the school-going children, pregnant women and convalescing patients. She liked this role better than constantly moving on tours and nightly performances. His second wife, Laxmamma was active on the stage and took all important roles in the plays and so would accompany him in all his tours. In 1919 itself China Ramaiah, Krishnaji's forster son, joined Govinda Rao. They stayed together until 1927 when China Ramaiah was given the company's original name "Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha" and Govinda Rao adopted a new name to his Company, "Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali."

Govinda Rao's Company grew in eminence in a short time. Govinda Rao was blessed with talented and devoted daughters and dutiful sons-in-law and sons. In addition, he had the unstinted co-operation and assistance of China Ramaiah, his cousin, whose

technical acumen gave good dividends. China Ramaiah was a forceful actor whose performances in the roles of Rama, Yama and Sakara (in *Mrichakatika*) brought him recognition. Besides, his expertise in handling gadgets (dynamo set, new type of gas lights and operating trick scenes) soon gave the Company a recognition of merit and professionalism. Added to all these Govinda Rao's fame, both as a god-fearing man and perfect administrator and visionary brought to the company a rare distinction. With daughters and sons, all able singers and actors, the company flourished.

Govinda Rao, on the advice of China Ramaiah, devised a theatre with zinc sheets, which model, with a few adjustments, is followed even today. According to this the theatre hall is divided into two parts – the stage and the auditorium. The stage part is a raised platform, the roof of which is higher than the roof of the auditorium. The fifteen feet roof of the stage enables to hold several curtains and enough space for trick scenes, showing angels, saints and gods descending from above. There are usually 15 curtains, all rolled upwards and are covered on either side by wooden side wings which are drawn away when the scene is over. This is convenient to run the show without a break, the change from one scene to the other taking less than five seconds. With this huge apparatus, with over sixty men and women, the company travelled from village to village and performed almost throughout the year taking a break only when the camp is shifted.

In Peda Ramaiah's time, the entire family stayed together and ate together. Govinda Rao thought that each family should have greater freedom and privacy. So he devised a new plan for the families to stay along with him. The stage space was now enlarged on either side of the wings and 'quarters' with zinc sheets were constructed, where there would be a living room and a kitchen for each one of the families. This also helped the cause of production because for make-up and costume changes, each one has privacy. The performances were always seen as celebrations in the environment of a happy combined family.

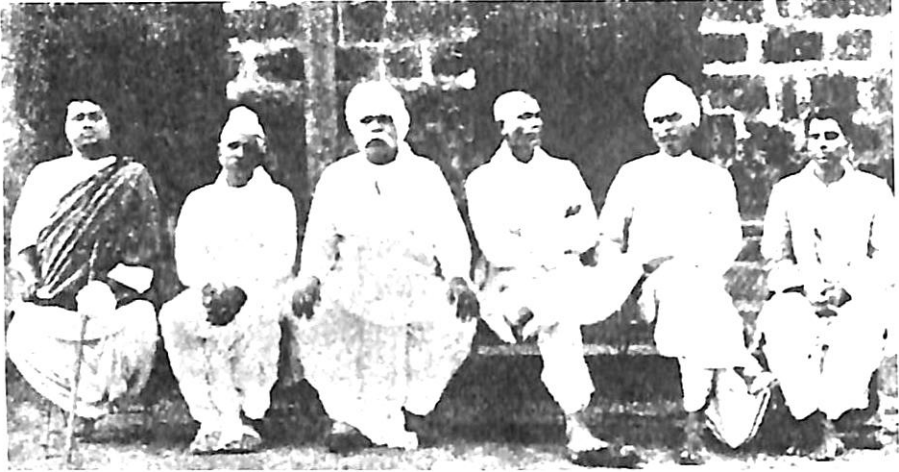
Govindaraya Surabhi Natyamandali, 1927

When China Ramaiah wanted to leave Govinda Rao in 1927 to start the Sarada Manovinodini Nataka Sabha, Govinda Rao, with the advice of friends like Hari Prasada Rao, one of the most well-known and respected actors belonging to the Guntur First Company, started a separate company and called it "Govindaraya Surabhi Natyamandali" in the same year. This is also the first independent theatre company branched off from the original company. This is also the first of the Surabhi companies which carried a 'title reference' to "Surabhi" showing their life-long gratitude. Govinda Rao insisted that all his sons and daughters should do likewise.

Govindaraya Surabhi Natyamandali was occasionally referred to as Sarada Manovinodini Nataka Sabha in its initial years. It was also called the "Surabhi First Company" in the fashion of Guntur First Company. The Company was a training ground for renowned actors and actresses, for whom this company served as a nursery. Govinda Rao initiated a new method of acquiring plays. He invited well-known playwrights like Malladi Viswanatha Sarma, Malladi Venkatakrishna Sarma and Kopparapu Subba Rao to stay with the company and write plays for it.

Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad

If Govinda Rao single-handedly brought a thorough transformation in the thinking and working methods of the puppet families by choosing theatrical performances as a profession for his clan people, he was to a large extent instrumental in founding an apex theatre organization in the Telugu speaking areas to bring all theatre activists onto one platform called the Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad (ANKP) in 1929¹⁰. Until then there was no platform for playwrights, actors, directors and critics to meet seasonally at a place and discuss the practical and aesthetic problems that confronted Telugu theatre. There were stray attempts towards achieving such a goal, but none was a sustained effort. Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad was founded just for that purpose, and



Left to right : Viswanadha Kaviraju, Kasinadhuni Nageswara Rao, Achanta Venkataraya Sankhyayana Sarma, Chatti China Poornaiah Pantulu, Vanarasa Govinda Rao and Kothapally Laxmaiah

Govinda Rao was responsible for its starting with several luminaries from the fields of literature, culture and theatre, becoming willing partners in the endeavour.

The man who inspired Govinda Rao to initiate plans to bring various sections of theatre practitioners on to one platform was Viswanatha Kaviraju, an actor, scholar, poet, dramatist and visionary. His original name was Malladi Viswanatha Sarma, a Sanskrit and Telugu scholar working at Srikakulam and later at Vizianagaram, who came into contact with Govinda Rao in 1910. Even by 1913 Viswanatha Kaviraju held a consortium of playwrights, actors, critics and other theatre enthusiasts at Polaki, his native village in Srikakulam district. In 1929, Govinda Rao requested Kaviraju to visit Tenali, an important theatrical town in Guntur district, where he was camping at the time to have discussions on a new play for his company. Kaviraju, in his several trips, impressed upon Govinda Rao and Laxmaiah his secretary, the need for such a colloquium. Govinda Rao conceded the request; Laxmaiah started preparations, and Viswanatha Kaviraju stayed behind at Tenali to overview the planning and preparations.

Andhra Nataka Kalodharaka

The first conference of Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad took place on June 19, 20 and 21, 1929 at Tenali in the camp tent of Sri Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali. A committee headed by Govinda Rao supervised the arrangements with Kaviraju as the chairman of the Reception Committee and Kothapally Laxmaiah as the convenor. Stalwarts from all over the state attended and participated in the deliberations. Chatti China Poornaiah Pantulu, a veteran literateur, actor and critic, Achanta Venkataraya Sankhyayana Sarma of Vizianagaram, a playwright and scholar, Kaseenadhuni Nageswara Rao, editor of the prestigious Telugu daily, "Andhra Patrika", from Madras and leader of the Nationalist movement and scores of others attended the convention and stressed the need for such colloquiums to meet annually where scholars talked about various problems that confronted Telugu theatre. The initiative taken by Govinda Rao was highly appreciated. His concern for the overall development of the Telugu theatre won wide appreciation and the colloquium unanimously bestowed on him the title "Andhra Nataka Kalodharaka", a title which he richly deserved.

Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad marked a turning point in the history and development of Telugu theatre. It was not merely providing a platform for mutual exchange of opinions that made Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad important; it marked the debut of a new age of contemporary consciousness as the centre of its debate, and energized playwrights into a new realization of the changing social milieu. Though Govinda Rao belonged to the commercially oriented professional theatre tradition, he did not hesitate to welcome the new emphasis on social realism in drama.

Govinda Rao continued to evince keen interest in the activities of Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad for quite some time. In fact when the third session of Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad was held in 1932 at Madras he presided over the prestigious session and exhorted all theatre lovers to come together to enrich the Telugu theatre by

their co-ordinated efforts. He also bore the entire expenditure of the conference as he did for the first conference at Tenali and continued to help the Parishad all through his life.

Three important Tours – Madras, Rangoon and Telangana

After the successful conduct of the first Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad conference in 1929 Govinda Rao embarked on tours which brought him both money and fame. His company staged plays earlier in Madras but in December 1929 he planned a long-term tour covering Madras and Burma (now Myanmar). Though he did not accompany the Sarada Manovinodini Sabha's first tour under Peda Ramaiah to Rangoon (the reasons for such omission are not available) he now thought that it would be a fruitful excercise.

Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali staged six plays at the Victoria Town Hall in Madras before they embarked on their journey to Burma. Their schedule in Madras ran as follows¹²:

6-12-1929	<i>Kumara Vijayam</i>
7-12-1929	<i>Kanakatara</i>
8-12-1929	<i>Dasavataramulu</i>
9-12-1929	<i>Srikrishna Leelalu</i>
10-12-1929	<i>Sati Savitri</i>
11-12-1929	<i>Sati Anasuya</i>

All the plays drew large crowds. Everyone interested in drama crowded to see the plays. It was said that each day two to three hundred people had to go back for want of seats. The house was full. High Court Judges, high profile advocates, Government administrative officers of high rank, Zamindars and connoisseurs of art in Madras showered praises and gifts on the members of the Company. They unanimously congratulated Govinda Rao for his efforts to present plays of such high calibre.

From Madras the Company travelled to Rangoon, the capital city of the then Burma (Myanmar) where a large number of migrant Telugu people lived. This trip was made possible when Harikrishna Pillai, a ship-owner and leader of the South Indian community, had undertaken to sponsor fifteen plays. The Company would stay for a month and perform plays on all the days except on Tuesdays and Saturdays. They travelled from Madras in two ships – “Ellanpura” and “Ethiopia¹³”. A 52-member team started on January 3rd and reached Rangoon on 7th, 1930. There was almost a debacle, for Harikrishna Pillai was not ready for such a big contingent, huge equipment, a large number of curtains and lights. On a personal plea from Govinda Rao and Laxmaiah, Venkata Reddy, a wealthy Telugu gentleman came to their rescue and the team was well settled.

The staging of the plays started on 12th January, 1930. The plays performed were: *Harischandra*, *Kanakatara*, *Sati Savitri*, *Sati Anasuya*, *Kumara Vijayam*, *Kusalava*, *Dasavataaramulu*, *Srikrishna Leelalu*, *Ravanacharyalu*, *Sampoorna Ramayanam*, *Sampoorna Mahabharatam*, *Mahananda*, *Kantamathi*, *Bobbili Yuddham* and *Jaganmohana*. The plays were received with great enthusiasm. A public function was held by the “Surangi Rajah”, the Crown Prince of Burma, to honour Govinda Rao and the members of the Company. The tour brought laurels to Govinda Rao and Surabhi theatre. The company came back to Polasanipalli via Barampuram, Vizianagaram, Visakhapatnam and Rajahmundry, performing at all these important centres, staying at each place for twenty to twenty five days. The tour was an unprecedented success.

Another important tour that was undertaken by Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali in 1933 was when it toured as many as eighteen Telangana towns. It was a roaring success because such a perfect professional group performing in Telugu never went into the interiors of Telangana region. People honoured them wherever they went. In cultural centres like Alampuram, Warangal and

Nizamabad, they had virtually to stay back and extend their stay to repeat the performances. On this tour, Govinda Rao was accompanied by Kopparapu Subba Rao, a well-known playwright. It was during this trip that Subba Rao wrote for the Company a new play, *Stree Samrajyam*, the first ever social play performed by a Surabhi Company. Laxmamma, Govinda Rao's wife who was still active insisted that she should be given the lead role in the play of a woman who demanded liberty. She did the role very creditably, as reports of the time indicate.

The Company visited the erstwhile Nizam State in 1935 again when they were invited to present plays on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee Celebrations of Nawab Mir Ali Khan's succession to the throne in that year.

Govinda Rao, the Path-finder

In the first generation, the only theatre company was Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha, started by the last three brothers of Sanjeeva Rao, initiated and inspired by Govinda Rao and directed, in its early years of consolidation by Subbadas and backed by Chenna Reddy and Rami Reddy. From 1889 to 1927, it moved on from success to more success under the guidance of Govinda Rao, and the supervision of Peda Ramaiah.

In 1927, as the families grew large and inclinations for starting other theatre companies were perceptible, Govinda Rao was convinced that there was ample scope for other companies to prosper. Following the suggestion of a theatre savant, Hari Prasada Rao, Govinda Rao started his own company, "Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali", conceding the name and fame gained by "Sarada Manovinodini Sabha" to China Ramaiah who ran the company for sometime. In the thirties, however, Govinda Rao's sons and daughters, all trained in theatre, started their own companies, thus enlarging the area of operation and extending the professional theatre possibilities to their logical perfection.

That they took theatre as profession was not an accident. Govinda Rao's life-long ambition to build a viable and prosperous professional theatre with commercial success was cherished by his children also. If he was a dreamer, his children realized the dream. Almost all of them, except the eldest son of the family, Hanumantha Rao, chose theatre as their place of work and worship. Each one, at one time or the other, ran his or her own company. Sometimes two people joined together to bear the brunt. As in all traditional professions, in Surabhi theatre also, the people in it knew only that work for which they were groomed and nothing else. And, since childhood, they were groomed to be actors or backstage people. In fact, they became proficient in all the jobs from gate-keeping and pulling the curtains to performing the most difficult roles. Every Surabhi man is a jack of all trades, but master of at least one, sometimes two or three. We have to understand the expansion of the Surabhi companies from the point of view of how a child was brought up. Surabhi children were brought up with the dream that they too should run a Surabhi Company one day which dream was instilled in them even during the early years of a child's development.

There is also an external cause for this expansion. Govinda Rao, an astout visionary he was, looked at the contemporary theatrical scene. By late 1920's and early 30's the golden age of drama (mainstream drama) was slowly giving way to stereotypes – imitations of popular plays. Singing of poems elaborating each raga had become a passion both with the actors and their "fans". With the onset of cinema in 30's most of the well-known actors migrated to the new and rich pastures of cinema. Since the central figures discarded group activities for personal gains, the less-talented were left as orphans. It was at this stage that middlemen (called "Contractors") who hitherto served as local agents of theatre groups arranging performances and taking commission, now gained importance as "brokers" of stage presentations. Their method was to draw actors who were not very busy, from various places of Andhra, fix up a date and a venue for performance and

arrange the show. These were called “contract” dramas. With the advent of such performances, rehearsals were out of question. Continuity and mutual co-ordination in action and reaction sequences were abandoned. Each one did his role as he learnt it. In order to retain personal flavour and importance, each one sang to his or her throat’s fill, throwing drama into the gutter.

In short, Telugu theatre was in chaos. No doubt, there was the new genre of realistic prose play that was slowly emerging as a dominant style, but the traditional musical drama on which generations of Telugu audiences were fed had become skeletal and directionless. Govinda Rao thought that his kind of professional drama would fill in this void. Scholars and critics praised Govinda Rao’s plays for their literary-worthiness and stage - worthiness as well. Special authors were commissioned to write plays which would entertain the class and the mass, the urbanites and the rural people. It had all the ingredients of make - believe. Added to all these were the stage “tricks” in which they were proficient. Women portraying female roles has always been a part of their tradition. Surabhi has had some of the best female actors even when compared to the mainstream drama. In fact Govinda Rao also knew that if he groomed his sons and daughters into this “wholesome theatre activity”, there was no going back on it.

So, he leaped into action. Child after child got training, was married and started his or her own Company. Modalities were never different - the same code of conduct; the same discipline; the same performance schedule. Only people at the helm of affairs changed. Thus each son and daughter got into ‘stage business’ after quite a few years of apprenticeship in Govinda Rao’s company.

Govinda Rao’s Progeny

Govinda Rao had two wives – Peda Subbamma and Laxmibai or *Laxmamma*. Both were Aveti Gangaiah’s daughters. Peda Subbamma had three sons and five daughters. The eldest was Hanumantha Rao, who became a Municipal overseer in Vizianagaram. Govinda Rao never insisted on unwilling



Govinda Rao's first wife
Peda Subbamma

youngsters to come into theatre profession. His two other sons, Subba Rao and Koteswara Rao together inherited the Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali when Govinda Rao retired from active work in 1942. Subba Rao and his wife Narayanamma played the lead roles. Koteswara Rao was a painter and played comic roles.

The eldest daughter of Peda Subbamma was Anjanamma, who, after the early death of her husband Sahadeva Rao, stayed on with Govinda Rao at Polasanipalli. The second daughter Balobai was married to Mallaiah. The third one, Dhanalaxmi Devi married Pullaiah, the only son of Papabai. The fourth, Narasamma, married Sindhe Venkatappa. The fifth daughter, Chellayamma, was married to Nageswara Rao, son of Aveti Venkataswamy.

Among the daughters, Anjanamma and Balobai stayed in Govinda Rao's Company. Dhanalaxmi Devi, the third daughter, who married Aveti Pullaiah, had five sons and a daughter – Srikrishna Babu Rao, Prakasa Rao, Chandra Rao, Leela Papparao and Krishna Prasad. Surabhi Balasaraswathi, the renowned film actress was their daughter. Pullaiah and Dhanalaxmi founded Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali in 1935 which is one of the five Surabhi groups still active.

Among the five brothers, Babu Rao is an ace harmonist, one of the foremost harmonists in the state. He is also an actor of merit. Prakasa Rao and his wife Sakuntala used to play the lead roles. Prakasa Rao did a large variety of roles with understanding and was acclaimed as a great actor. Chandra Rao, who raised his own company in later years, played villain's roles in the parent company. Leela Paparao, also a noted harmonist is an actor with considerable mastery in singing. Babu Rao's role as Balarama in *Maya Bazar* and Papa Rao's role as Shirdi Sai Baba have received deserving accolades. Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali's *Kurukshetram*, *Maya Bazar*, *Balanagamma* and *Bhookailas* are justly popular.

Chellayamma's husband Nageswara Rao was an innovative actor and able organizer. His "Surabhi New Poornananda Dramatic Theatres" was started by Aveti Ramaiah, his elder brother and himself. Rao and Aveti Poornima, his sister-in-law, took the lead roles in all their plays which were long remembered. Though, in the early years Poornima, a noteworthy actress, whose career outside the Surabhi theatres is better recognized, played the lead heroine's roles. Later, Nageswara Rao's wife, Chellayamma handled the roles with credit. Nageswara Rao's sister, Janaki was also playing important roles in the company. Her Krishna's role was very popular.

Nageswara Rao was a progressive company manager. He followed some of the strict schedules followed outside Surabhi. He insisted that they should rehearse each play every time it was performed, though that might have already been performed several hundreds of times. He also modernized the costume pattern and ornamentation and reduced the 'raga' elaboration to a reasonable limit.

Nageswara Rao was also responsible for commissioning new plays for his company. His "*Vasantasena*", adapted from "*Mrichakatika*" by Malladi Venkatakrishna Sarma was praised by scholars as a memorable work. His son Manohar, who was a good

actor, ran the company for sometime after his father's death. Manohar also died an untimely death.

Nageswara Rao's commendable work in organizing a consortium of 36 Surabhi associations will be long remembered by his people. He established "Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham" in 1956 at Tenali, the same place where his father-in-law, Govinda Rao, was instrumental in starting a state-wide consortium, Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad. Nageswararao also organized the Saptati Mahotsavam of Surabhi (Seventy years Celebration) in 1960 on a grand scale.

His company was known for its well-disciplined performances of *Sati Anasuya*, *Satya Hrischandra*, *Mayala Marathi*, *Kurukshetram* and *Vasantasena*.



Govinda Rao and Laxmamma

Govinda Rao had five daughters by his second wife, Laxmamma or Laxmi Bai, who was also a daughter of Aveti Gangaiah. Laxmamma was herself a well-known actress in the early days of Sarada Manovinodini.

Their eldest daughter Subhadramma was a versatile actress, who did both male and female roles with equal facility and founded a company along with her husband, Rekandar China Venkata Rao.

This company, Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali, started in 1937, is today one of the leading Surabhi companies and is run under the management of Rekandar Nageswara Rao, popularly called Babji. It was earlier managed by his elder brothers, Dasarathi Rao and Bhoja Raju, until Dasaratha Rao left the company and Bhoja Raju died a few years back. Dasarathi Rao, before he shifted to Vizianagaram, was the company's harmonist and Bhoja Raju played villain's roles. Bhoja Raju was also adept in backstage work, especially the scenic work. As a representative Surabhi Company, it has a prestigious name in the country, having had the unique advantage of some of the plays directed by B.V. Karanth, one of the luminaries of modern theatre. More about this theatre's recent experimental work later.

The most important plays in this Company's repertoire include *Sri Krishna Leelalu*, *Lavakusa*, *Sampoorna Ramayanam*, *Maya Bazar*, *Sati Anasuya*, *Satya Harischandra* and *Balanagamma*, besides *Basti Devata Yadamma*, *Bheeshma* and *Chandi Priya*. Its play on Veerabrahmendra Swamy, popularly called *Brahmamarigari Charitra*, has been a much performed play.

Laxmamma's second daughter Poornima was married to Aveti Ramaiah, son of Aveti Venkataswamy. Both of them had raised a company called Poornima Surabhi Natyamandali, but it was short lived. Poornima had her theatre training from the illustrious actor-director, Bellary Raghava. She was for sometime in New Poornananda Dramatic Theatres of Aveti Nageswara Rao, her brother-in-law, but left that too to become a free-lance actress. Her Surabhi background and her theatre training had put her in a coveted position in contemporary Telugu theatre. Thus she had an opportunity to perform prestigious roles with understanding and distinction. She was for long a popular actress on the Telugu stage. She performed with almost every top theatre artist including Banda, Peesapati, Abburi, and scores of others. She had also acquitted herself well in the cinema world.

The third daughter, Santhamma or Santhakumari, married Aveti Prasada Rao. Prasada Rao and his brother Chalapati Rao, sons of Aveti Venkataswamy, started "Gajapathi Natyamandali" which had a lively tenure of around twenty years. Santhamma also played in mainstream theatres successfully. Her performance as Madhuravani in *Kanyasulkam* was greatly appreciated. Prasada Rao and Santhamma had four sons – Ramana Kumar, Shyam Sundar, Raghunath and Rayalu. They were all active in theatre in different parts of Andhra. Shyam, before he succumbed to an untimely death, did some memorable roles for Gajapathi Natya Mandali. Chalapati Rao, after a short stint, left his brother, to start his own company. He, along with his wife Nagalaxmi, the fourth daughter of Govinda Rao and Laxmamma started "Sri Govardhana Natya Mandali" in 1943.

Shanmukhamma (she changed her name to Vasundhrara Devi after marriage), the last daughter of Govinda Rao and Laxmamma was married to Aveti Ramachandra Rao. They ran a company, "Vasundhara Natya Mandali", since 1953. Sindhe Narayana Rao, a relative played the lead roles in this company, while Vasundhara played the leading female roles.

Due to Govinda Rao's far-sighted care and professional acumen, Surabhi theatre groups had multiplied within 15 years. What was one Samajam when it started in 1889, three when the brothers parted ways in 1910 and four by 1927, Surabhi branched off into 36 by 1956 when the *Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham*, the apex body to coordinate the work of all Surabhi Companies was formed.

Theatre as Hereditary Profession

The sudden spurt in numbers was not an accident; nor the reason for such expansion difficult to presume. Firstly, the children, especially the daughters of Govinda Rao were well-trained, disciplined and meritorious actresses. They were born, so to say, on the stage; for the stage. That was their world and they worked hard to stay there and, of course, enjoyed being there. Their husbands, drawn into this professional milieu, stayed with the companies as managers, as harmonists and as actors.

The second reason for such a rapid expansion was that the times between 1928 – 1940 augured well for any well-knit, organized professional theatre company because theatre outside, especially the professional theatre, was virtually in chaos. Contractors, who ruled the roost, introduced unhealthy practices. Elaborate and undramatic singing, by actors coming from different places assembling at a place just before the performance and go on to the stage without even a single rehearsal, conflicting egos of actors and double casts for major roles in order to draw cronies of individual actors into the audience – the whole atmosphere was vitiated. In such a situation, the Surabhi plays came off as fresh breeze - sincerity, dutiful attention to characterization, single-minded devotion, one person-one character equation, controlled and meaningful singing; plays well-written with audience interest as the main criterion – all these helped Surabhi theatre to provide an alternative theatre entertainment – sane and healthy.

The hereditary profession of theatre performers had another salutary effect on the artists. Since all of them belong to a community, alien to the native community, this profession gave them a psychological binding with their fellow community members. So several members of the families close to a particular Surabhi group joined them. Unless a company is wound up due to financial loss, the members, however meagerly paid, would not like to leave the company. This is mainly for psychological security, kinship feeling and family togetherness.

Saptati Mahotsavam (Seventieth Birthday Celebrations) of Govinda Rao

All theatre lovers of Andhra celebrated the Saptati Mahotsavam of Govinda Rao on the completion of his 70th year on the 19th and 20th of December, 1937 at Eluru when a grand function was arranged. On 19th Govinda Rao was blessed by a posse of Vedic scholars and priests at his home in Eluru (he had one in Eluru also) and on 20th a public function was held. Mote Ganga Raju, a lover of arts and Zamindar of Eluru was the Chairman of the



Gubbi Veeranna

Reception Committee and a host of celebrities participated. A bust-sized stone sculpture of Vanarasa Govinda Rao was unveiled on the occasion by another great professional company proprietor from Karnataka – G.H. Veeranna (Gubbi Veeranna, of the Chenna Basaveswara Kripa Poshita Nataka Sangha) at the Yuvajana Hindu Sangham, Eluru.

Stalwarts in the field of theatre and literature assembled at Eluru to pay their respects to Govinda Rao, the architect of Surabhi theatres and the founding father of the professional theatre movement in Andhra and the Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad. Yadavalli Suryanarayana (Vijayawada), Mote Ganga Raju (Eluru), Tumuluri Sivaramaiah (Nellore), Sthanam Narasimha Rao and Tripuraribhotla Veeraraghava Swamy (Tenali), Tallavajhala Sivasankara Sastry (Bapatla) and Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry (Rajahmundry) paid their tributes to Govinda Rao. In the morning several renowned poets read their extollatory poems on Surabhi and Govinda Rao, presided over by that illustrious poet-dramatist, Chellapilla Venkata Sastry, author of the renowned Mahabharata plays.

To coincide with the Saptati celebrations, the Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad held its conference on this occasion in Eluru on December 18, 19 and 20, 1937 and it was a festive occasion for everyone. On 18th Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali presented

Mahananda written by Viswanatha Kaviraju, who also dedicated his prose play *Kalidas* to Govinda Rao on the occasion. Ankala Venkata Subba Rao, a well known painter, presented his latest painting, "Mohini" to him.

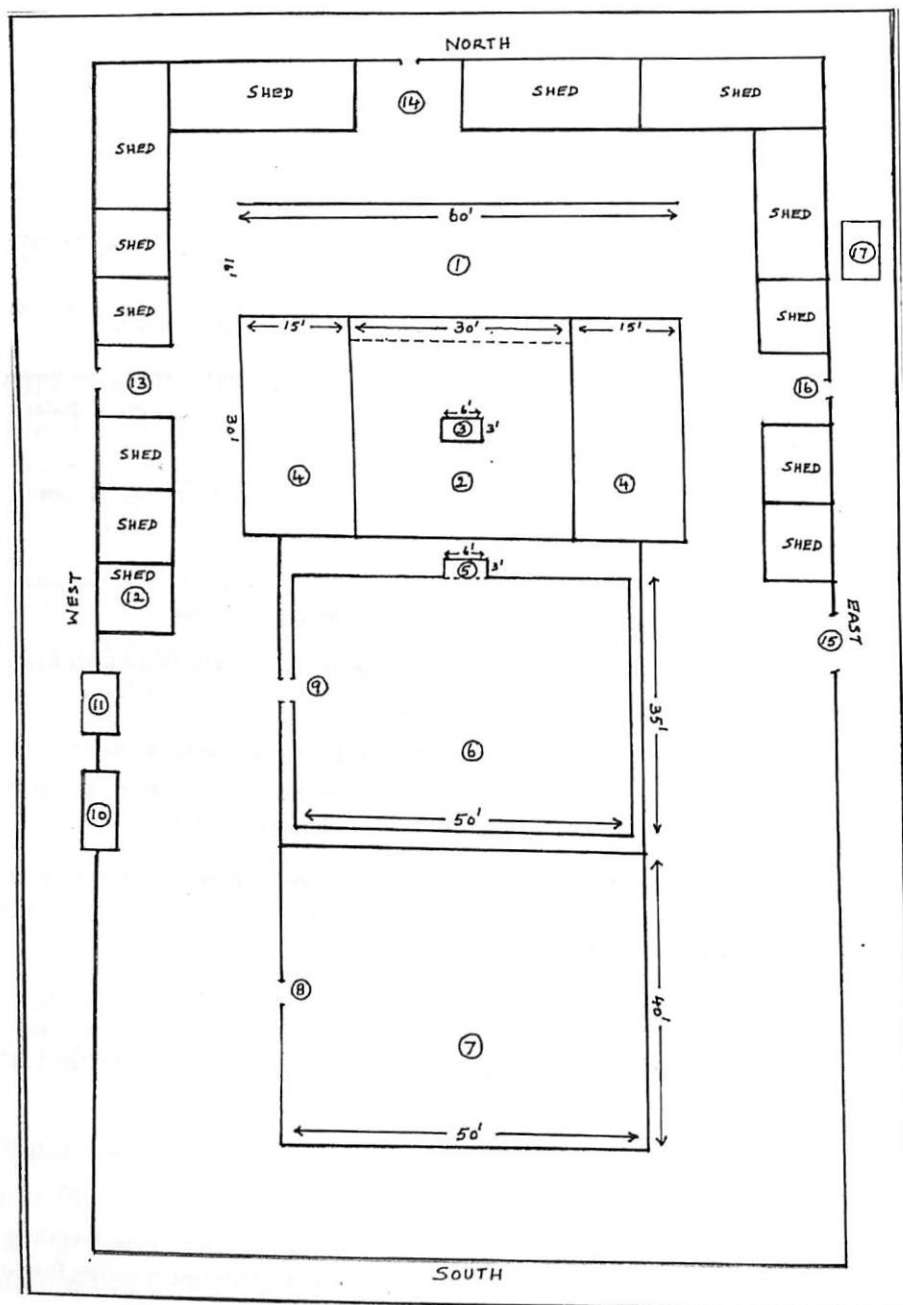
Govinda Rao was taken in a procession on a decked elephant (*Gaja-aarohana*), with Mote Ganga Raju, Viswanatha Kaviraju, Gubbi Veeranna, and other luminaries walking in front of the procession. Among poets and scholars who spoke in praise of the Surabhi founder were Neelamraju Venkata Seshaiah, Pamarti Venkateswara Rao, Katta Achaiah, Kothapalli Sundararamaiah, Janamanchi Venkata Subrahmanya Sarma, Nandiraju Chalapati Rao and Utukuri Satyanarayana Rao were noteworthy. All newspapers and journals wrote editorials on the contribution of Govinda Rao to Telugu theatre. As V. Chandrasekharam of Nellore and a respected theatre man said this grand function was a fitting tribute to an organizer, proprietor, actor, humanist and visionary whose services to the stage and the state are publicly and befittingly acknowledged on the occasion.

Govinda Rao, after his 70th Birthday celebration, slowly withdrew from active theatre activity and spent a retired life at Polasanipalli, advising his sons and daughters in matters of running their organizations. He bequeathed his own company to his sons, Subba Rao and Koteswara Rao, his second and third sons, the eldest not having chosen theatre as profession. After spending a peaceful and retired life in the serene surroundings of his village, he passed away on 19-12-1953.

A grateful 'Surabhi family' – large family of about 3000 people belonging to the original Vanarasa, Aveti, Rekandar and Sindhe families, their daughters and sons-in-law, their sons and daughters-in-law, and the grand and great grand children of four generations celebrate December 19th of every year, the day of Govinda Rao's *Vardhanti*, as "Surabhi Day", a fitting tribute to the architect of Surabhi theatres.

NOTES

1. For details of the early practices of the division of proceeds, see Hari Purushotham, "Surabhi Vari Samajika Jeevanamu, *Natya Kala*, July, 1968, pp. 48-55.
2. Several dramatic poets extolled the munificence of Surabhi proprietors in eulogistic terms. See particularly, Pisupati Chidambara Sastry's poems in the "Testimonials" (p.11) and the encomiums given to Govinda Rao by dramatists in *Saptati Mahotsva Sanchika*, Eluru : 1937. pp. 7, 12, 19, 20 and 49.
3. See P.S.R. Appa Rao, "Surabhi Nataka Samajamulu," *Telugu Swatantra*, July 25, 1959, p.7.
4. Baba Rao's interview recorded on 18.06.1999 contains details about the deal.
5. Kothapally Laxmaiah has been hailed as the key person for implementing the vision of Govinda Rao. His plays - *Bharata Pattabhishekam* and *Tulasi* - were popularly performed in schools.
6. See for reports of such camps, *Andhra Patrika* (daily) September 4, 1915 and October 9, 1915.
7. See for details of Vanarasa Govinda Rao as an actor, V.V.L. Narasimha Rao, *Naa Nataka Ranga Anubhavalu*, Hyderabad : Telugu Akademi, 2004, pp. 103-105.
8. Personal documents of Vanarasa Govinda Rao with the family of Sri Pullabhotla Rama Murthy, Polasanipalli, West Godavari District.
9. The first reference to Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali was on September 27, 1927 when it was also referred to as the "Surabhi First Company". The company confirmed its name from August, 1928 with a series of performances in Madras.
10. Though the conference took place for three days at Tenali on June 19, 20 and 21, 1929, Govinda Rao sent appeals to playwrights, actors and associations on January 24, 1929 and again on March 18, 1929.
11. The 'title' to Govinda Rao was proposed by Chatti China Poornaiah Pantulu, the President of the sessions and seconded by Kasinadhuni Nageswara Rao. The citation was read by Malladi Viswanatha Kaviraju. For details see *Andhra Patrika* (Daily) for Jun 21 and 22, 1929.
12. As per the Company's advertisement in *Andhra Patrika* (Daily), September 28, 1929 and on October 14, 1929.
13. For more details, see the Annual Report for 1929 of Sree Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali, Polasanipalli published in 1930 and also reports published in *Andhra Patrika* (Daily), December 5, 1929.
14. The honours and encomiums showered on Govinda Rao on the two days of the celebrations were published in a Souvenir, *Sri Vanarasa Govinda Raya Saptati-tama Mahotsavamamu*, edited by Kothapally Laxmaiah, Eluru : 1937.



The plan of a typical Surabhi Tent

ONE TREE AND THIRTY SIX BRANCHES

The Story of Surabhi through Four Generations(1910-1960)

Shredding off the earlier puppet profession, the Aare people welcomed their new vocation - theatre - thanks to the benevolent attitude and continuous help of the friendly people of Surabhi village in general and Allapureddy Chenna Reddy and Kovuru Rami Reddy in particular. In gratitude, they have chosen 'Surabhi' as their second family name. The 'Vanarasa' family and its immediate kith and kin belonging to 'Aveti', 'Rekandar' and 'Sindhe' families were solely responsible for venturing into this new *avatar*. After Govinda Rao decided on this venturesome path, with the support of his father and uncles, there was no going back. They had travelled through thick and thin during these many years and reached a stage when they stood at the high pinnacle of fame as a rare and unique "professional", "family" theatre in the country that lived through 120 years and, without a single day's gap, continued to perform.

In order to understand how Surabhi has grown into such a large family unit, we must look into the family genealogies of the first and second generations of Surabhi people through the next two generations.

The First Generation: the Vanarasa Brothers

1. The Eldest Ramaiah's Family



Vanarasa Ramaiah

The eldest son of Sanjeeva Rao, the 'first' Ramaiah, had four sons and a daughter – Vazir Rao, Veeraiah, Hanumantha Rao, Rangappa and Ramanujulamma. Though the 'first' Ramaiah did not participate in the family activities, his first son, Vazir Rao, came into the theatre tradition by founding the Laxmi Prasanna Natya Mandali. When he died in 1955, his son Vanarasa (Janagaon) Ramaiah inherited the Natya Mandali. Ramaiah played villain's roles. His sister Subbamma and her husband Rekandar Venkateswara Rao played the lead roles. Eldest Ramaiah's only daughter, Ramanujulamma was married to Aveti Venkataswamy, son of Aveti Gangaiah by his second wife, Govindamma.

2. Subbaiah's Family

Subbaiah, the second son of Sanjeeva Rao, had one son and two daughters – Ramachandra Rao, Peda Papabai and China Papabai. Both the daughters came into the fold of the younger uncle's profession, first of puppetry and then of theatre.

Peda Ramaiah, the last son of Sanjeeva Rao, adopted Peda Papabai early in her life, when the Vanarasa family took to puppetry. Even as a young girl, Papabai received laurels for her singing capabilities. She was acclaimed both for her singing, dancing and histrionic talents and was said to be the backbone of Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha. She donned all major roles when the troupe travelled to Rangoon. China Ramaiah took the male lead, and Peda Ramaiah, said to be a good comic actor, was the manager and also acted in character roles.

Kochervu Gangi Reddy, who adopted the name of Aveti Gangaiah to facilitate his marriage with Peda Papabai, lived with the Vanarasa family. Their only son, Pullaiah, married Govinda Rao's third daughter, Dhanalakshmi Devi. The couple founded Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali later.

Peda Papabhai's younger sister China Papabai was Aveti Venkataswamy's second wife, the first one being her own cousin, Ramanujamma, daughter of the eldest of the family, Ramaiah. She had no children.

3. Veeraiah's Family

Sanjeeva Rao's third son was Veeraiah. He did not participate in the performance activities of his younger brothers. He had three sons. His eldest son Kesappa also kept himself away from these performances. However, his other two sons, Pullaiah and Anjanappa maintained a samajam for sometime.

4. Krishnaji's Family

Sanjeeva Rao's fourth son, Krishnaji (referred to as 'Peda' Krishnaji as there was another Krishnaji later) had four wives. He participated, along with his two younger brothers, in the theatre activities of the Vanarasa family. Records name him as an active actor, and at least one testimonial mentions him as the manager of the Surabhi Company, Sarada Manovinodini Sabha, in one of its early sojourns in Kadapa district.

Krishnaji's wives were – Narasamma, Sivamma, Venkamma and Venkubai and their children also participated in theatre activities. He had a son Laxmaiah by his first wife, Narasamma and Anjanappa by his second wife, Sivamma, Hanumantha Rao and Kamala Bai by his third wife. He also adopted a son, China Ramaiah. He went to Madras for treatment of an ailment and died there in 1916.

Krishnaji's youngest wife was the famous actress Jhanjhuti Venkubai, who had specialized in rendering the Jhanjhuti 'raga',



Jhanjhuti Venkubai

for which she was given that title at Secunderabad by no less a person than Dharmavaram Gopalacharyulu¹, a prominent practising lawyer and playwright, and brother of 'Andhra Nataka Pitamaha' Dharmavaram Krishnamacharyulu.

After Krishnaji passed away in 1916, Venkubai maintained a samajam called Venkubai Surabhi Nataka Samajam, for a short while.

Krishnaji's adopted son, China Ramaiah, along with Govinda Rao, was responsible for putting Surabhi on sound lines in the early years of Sarada Manovinodini Sabha. In the very first Surabhi performance of *Keechaka Vadha*, China Ramaiah took the role of the youngest of the Pandavas, Sahadeva.

China Ramaiah was with his uncle Peda Ramaiah until the latter died in 1914 and served the Sarada Manovinodini Sabha with dedication. Then he joined Govinda Rao and was with his Sabha until 1927, when China Ramaiah started his own company and Govinda Rao started the Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali. China Ramaiah then inherited the name Sri Sarada Manovinodini Nataka Sabha. When he retired, he spent his last years at Hyderabad. His son Abbaji Rao and his wife Seeta Mahalaxmi managed the company for sometime.

Krishnaji's second son, Anjanappa, was a good violinist, having had his training from Kotaiah Devara of Machilipatnam. He was also a renowned harmonist. He had two daughters – Koteswari and Vijayalaxmi – both being good actresses. During the early days of the silent films Anjanappa was said to have engaged the cinema audiences with his harmonium music. When China Ramaiah left Govinda Rao's company, Anjanappa joined Govinda Rao and strengthened the team's musical virtuosity. He also did the role of Anjaneya after Govinda Rao retired from doing it due to an accident.

Krishnaji's daughter, Kamala Bai, is the famous cinema star of yester years, Surabhi Kamala Bai. She was the first heroine of the



Surabhi Kamalabai (centre) as Leelavathi in the first Telugu Talkie, "Bhakta Prahlada"

Telugu Cinema having played the role of Leelavathi in the first Telugu talkie, "Bhakta Prahlada³". In fact even the role of Prahlada was donned by a Surabhi boy, Sindhe (or Sindhuri) Krishnaji. He was a nephew of Jhanjhuti Venku Bai.

Surabhi Kamala Bai also started a company which lived for a short time in which this Krishnaji had taken part. He, in later years,

learnt music and worked with several Surabhi companies as a harmonist.

It was said that the elder Krishnāji, who groomed both Kamala Bai and China Ramaiah to be great actors with excellent histrionic talents, could do any role with commendable facility. He donned the role of Bhima in *Keechaka Vadha*. As reports suggested, he played the role of Raja Raja Narendra in the play *Sarangadhara* in the first scenes and appeared later as the hangman (talari) who was to hang the prince, Sarangadhara in the last scene⁴.

5. Venkoji's Family

Venkoji, Sanjeeva Rao's fifth son, was the earliest actor among the Surabhi people to don the major lead roles. In the first play, *Keechaka Vadha*, he was Keechaka. In the later days of Raptati Subbadas, he played Dushyanta to Subbadas' Kanva, Harischandra and Sarangadhara respectively in *Sakuntalam*, *Harischandra* and *Sarangadhara*. He died at Madanapalli in 1924 with tuberculosis.

Venkoji also had four wives. By his first wife Chennamma, he had a son and a daughter – Hanumantha Rao and Ammayamma. Both of them were great singers. Hanumantha Rao was known as "Fidelu Hanumantha Rao⁵" for he learnt violin (fidelu) from that maestro, Garikapati Kotaiah Devara of Machilipatnam. His daughter, Ammayamma or Ammani was a long time attraction in her younger days for her sonorous voice. Several appreciative commendations of her singing abilities were given by important dignitaries that witnessed the plays.

Venkoji's second wife Sunkamma had a daughter, Anjanamma. It was at Sunkamma's insistence that Venkoji took Govinda Rao as an adopted son. After they adopted Govinda Rao, Anjanamma was born. His third and fourth wives China Subbamma and Ramanujamma had no children.

Venkoji's adopted son, Govinda Rao was active from 1885 to 1942 and devoted himself completely to theatre and Surabhi welfare. His life and his wide-ranging activities concerning Surabhi popularity were briefly dealt with already.

After the demise of Venkoji, China Subbamma managed a theatre from 1924 to 1940. She was also greatly appreciated for her singing both in her puppetry days as well as during the theatre days. She played leading roles in her company. She was particularly known for her lead female roles, especially of queens and other royal women. Ammayamma, Venkoji's daughter by his first wife Chennamma, with her husband Rekandar Ramakrishna Rao managed a company Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali from the year 1933, which was later handed over to her son Venkata Rao. In 1937 China Venkata Rao and his wife Subhadramma took over the company and managed it successfully. Venkata Rao's sister Sarada Bai, along with Ammayamma played the leading female roles while Venkata Rao's brother-in-law, Tulasi Rao played the lead male roles.

6. Peda Ramaiah's Family

The last of Sanjeeva Rao's sons was Peda Ramaiah, who led the early destinies of the Surabhi people as well as the Sarada Manovinodini Sabha. As the youngest of the sons, he was with the younger generation temperamentally and intuitively and carried on the work assigned to him with dignity and capability. He was hailed for his versatility, his good-humoured and persuasive qualities and his leadership. It was during his time that all the bold and momentous changes in the lives of the Surabhi theatrical practitioners had taken place. While Govinda Rao, his elder brother's adopted son was the chief strategist and the mind behind the various undertakings, Peda Ramaiah was the organizer who put them into practice.

When Peda Ramaiah died in 1914 at Secunderabad while the company was touring Telangana districts, Papabai took over the Sarada Manovinodini Sabha and rechristened it as Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta Nataka Sabha. She was the proprietor of the company from 1914 to 1928.

Peda Ramaiah's wife Rama Bai started a company after her own name, "Rama Bai Surabhi Company" for a short while and

gave performances in south Rayalaseema. She was said to have some special plays written for her with a dominant female role in it, which no other Surabhi company had performed thus far. Plays such as *Prameelarjuneeyam* were popular with this company, which she did for twelve continuous days. She performed both male and female roles with equal poise.

Peda Ramaiah had two sons – Anjanappa and Syamala Rao. After his father's demise in 1914 Anjanappa founded a company and ran it until 1930 when his brother-in-law Sambhulingam took over the proprietorship of the company. In 1947 onwards Sambhulingam's brother, Kotaiah started a company, Sri Vijaya Natya Mandali. Until it was wound up in 1953, an outside actor Andhe Mallikarjuna Rao played the lead roles while Anjamma, Kotaiah's wife did the female lead. Sambhulingam's son, Pullaiah also ran a company for over ten years in which Pullaiah and his wife played the male and female lead roles.

7. Aveti Gangaiah's Family

The one family that should be talked about along with the family of Vanarasa brothers is that of Aveti Gangaiah, alias Kochervu Gangi Reddy, who adopted the family name of Aveti to marry Papabai, the daughter of Subbaiah. Though Aveti Gangaiah did not himself participate in the performances, his wife Papabai was a celebrity in the early phase of Surabhi history. She was Draupadi in *Keechaka Vadha* and eversince took up all leading female roles. Time and again, she was hailed by masses and elite wherever she performed. Honours and medals came her way easily. She participated in all the early plays performed by the Surabhi theatre. She took over the proprietorship of the Sarada Manovinodini Sangeetha Nataka Sabha after her uncle's demise and was active until 1935. She travelled with Sarada Manovinodini far and wide, even to Rangoon, and wherever she went, she brought laurels to Surabhi and her mentor, Peda Ramaiah.

Gangaiah had four wives – Papabai, Govindamma, Achamma and Naramma. He had a son by his first wife Papabai, by name



Aveti Papabai (sitting) with her only son Pullaiah and his wife Dhanalaxmi Devi and their three elder sons

Pullaiah, who later married Govinda Rao's daughter, Dhanalaxmi Devi. The sojourn of this Aveti family of Surabhi is as important as that of the Vanarasa family.

By his second wife Govindamma, Gangaiah had a son, Venkataswamy, a noted comic actor, whose children by his three wives started several Surabhi groups independently as well as combinedly.

Gangaiah had three daughters – Peda Subbamma, Laxmamma and China Subbamma. The first two were married to Govinda Rao and Venkoji married the third one.

Gangaiah's son, Venkataswamy had three wives. His eldest wife, Ramanjulamma, daughter of first Ramaiah, eldest son of Sanjeeva Rao, had two sons – Prasada Rao and Chalapati Rao. His second wife – China Papamma, a daughter of Subbaiah, had two sons – Pitchaiah and Ganapati Rao. His third wife, Anjanamma, Peda Ramaiah's daughter had two sons – Ramaiah and Nageswara Rao, both of them later becoming Govinda Rao's sons-in-law.

Unprecedented Expansion

From the year 1937, the year Govinda Rao celebrated his seventieth birthday, he slowly withdrew from active theatre work, having settled down at Polasanipalli, West Godavari district, finally retiring in 1942. Even by that time, he saw to it that all his sons and daughters start their own companies and become self-sufficient. His dreams in this respect were all fulfilled when, between 1935 and 1956, there were 36 Surabhi associations, major or minor, that were affiliated to the apex organization, Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham of which Rekandar China Venkata Rao was chosen as President and Aveti Nageswara Rao, Secretary. Among the thirty six companies ten belonged to Govinda Rao's children and the rest to his cousins' children.

Major and Minor Surabhi Groups

By 1960, when Surabhi completed seventy years of its fruitful existence, the Surabhi clan had expanded widely and almost every part of the state could be proud of a Surabhi troupe. It was proudly announced that some Surabhi company or the other performed a play everyday at one place or the other in Andhra Pradesh. Among the 36 companies listed by the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham⁷, ten companies are considered "major" and the remaining "minor".

What is a 'Major Company'?

According to their own norms, a major Surabhi theatre is one which has its own complete stage and auditorium materials and equipment, including furniture to hold 1500 to 2000 spectators, complete zinc sheet infrastructure to erect a "hall" with necessary side walls, complete lighting materials and costume, for the several plays they perform, multiple curtains to suit the various plays and backstage equipment suitable for all their plays. They must have personnel enough to stage any play they have on their repertoire. They must have at least 15 plays in their repertoire because 15 plays would fill in a month's bill at one place, since performances will be on alternate days.

Minor theatres will have fewer number of plays in their repertoire, say six or seven, and they borrow actors from the nearby companies of their own kith and kin. Sometimes they may request ex-actors who earlier worked in a Surabhi company which is now wound up. They will also borrow sets and lighting equipment if needed. Since many Surabhi plays have common scripts specially written for them by commissioned playwrights, it will not be usually difficult for artists to perform them. As a rule, plays commissioned during the first and second generation are 'common' plays. That was in the days of Sarada Mano Vinodini Sabha and Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali. When companies grew in number, each company commissioned its own plays. Another important convention is that the actors do not go out of their text under any circumstances and this also helps such an exchange of actors from one company to the other.

Among the major ten companies, six belonged to the family of Govinda Rao – mainly, to his daughters. The ten major companies took care not to perform close to one another except for tactical reasons, i.e, a minor company usually preferred to perform nearer to a major company since it depends on the major company for men and materials.

The history of the major ten companies in 1956 is in fact the history of the Surabhi theatres at the height of their popularity. The other twenty six and odd companies may be called 'Satellite Companies' or Minor Companies since they depended on the major companies for their continuing activities.

In the following list of the ten major companies, the list of proprietors of each company is shown chronologically indicating the first owner (1), followed by the second (2) and then third (3) and so on.

1. Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali

1. Vanarasa Govinda Rao

2. Subba Rao & Koteswara Rao

3. Koteswara Rao

Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali, started by Govinda Rao was at the height of its popularity from 1927 to 1942. Even during the managership of his sons Subba Rao and Koteswara Rao, it had successful innings.



Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali with
Vanarasa Subba Rao and the group

According to the 1929 “Annual Report” of Sri Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali, Polasanipalli for the year 1929 (published in 1930) there were 34 men actors and 13 women actors in the company. It may have another ten elders and children who are not listed. It also gives a list of the plays performed during the year and the number of performances each play got. This list reveals two important aspects of Govinda Rao’s company – the number of individual performances of each play and secondly, what response each play received since the number of performances indicates the popularity of a play. This compilation, in a way, is a self -assessment of the company’s performance, which determines what plays to be retained and what to be dropped.

Indirectly, this also gives us a clue regarding the audience' responses to the plays at that point of time. The list of plays and the number of performances of each in the year 1929 are given below:

<i>Dasavataramulu</i>	25 times
<i>Sati Savitri</i>	15 times
<i>Krishna Leelalu</i>	13 times
<i>Kanakatara</i>	12 times
<i>Anasuya</i>	12 times
<i>Kumara Vijayam</i>	11 times
<i>Sampurna Bhagavatam</i>	9 times
<i>Sampurna Ramayanam</i>	8 times
<i>Kantamati</i>	7 times
<i>Prahlada</i>	7 times
<i>Lankadahanam</i>	5 times
<i>Kusalava</i>	4 times
<i>Ravanacharyalu</i>	2 times
<i>Chintamani</i>	2 times
<i>Dharmasvamedhamu</i>	1 time
<i>Prameela</i>	1 time
Total=16 plays	134 performances

(This list does not include free shows in aid of some noble person or cause, which may account for another thirty plays).

The same itinerary was followed year after year. Each camp tested the validity of a new play. The number of performances also indicates how wisely the managers presented all the plays in a major camp and only some of the more prominent plays in minor camps.

After the Saptati mahotsavam in 1937 Govinda Rao lessened his theatre work and in 1942 the company was bequeathed to his two sons Subba Rao and Koteswara Rao. In its 25 years of active and pioneering work, Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali created several heroes, heroines, managers, harmonists, painters and other backstage experts. As Govinda Rao trained his children in all the aspects of theatre performance, each one chose one of the branches that came naturally to him or her.



Vanarasa Subba Rao



Vanarasa Koteswara Rao

Subba Rao, Govinda Rao's second son and Koteswara Rao, his third son, took over the reins of the company from Govinda Rao. Subba Rao established himself as an able manager and versatile actor. Subba Rao's performances as Kalidasa in *Kalidas* written by Viswanatha Kaviraju and the Mad King in *Mahananda*, another play written by Kaviraju, as 'Mayala Marathi' in *Balanagamma* and Alexander in the play *Alexander*, the last two plays written by Malladi Venkatakrishna Sarma exclusively for the company, were received well. His wife Satyanarayanamma played the leading female roles. Subba Rao's brother Koteswara Rao played humorous roles besides painting the sceneries needed by the Company. He was an able painter having learnt the art from Natya Visarada Vanarasa China Ramaiah. Koteswara Rao's wife Kumudvathi played important female roles. This company ventured into commissioning several new plays besides performing all the old plays that made Surabhi popular. Two new plays written during Subba Rao's tenure must be mentioned here:

one is *Mahananda*, a comedy which provided the company an opportunity to wean away from mythological plays. The other one was *Alexander*, perhaps one of the earliest historical plays of Surabhi companies. After nearly twenty five years under the brothers the company divided. Koteswara Rao got the Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali banner and Subba Rao and his sons started Sri Vijaya Bharati Natya Mandali, which is one of the five existing companies, now run by his son, Damodara Rao.

This theatre company was the foremost in 50's and 60's with an emphasis on fine ensemble acting, excellent scenery pieces and glittering costumes and owned a complete portable theatre which held 1500 spectators.

2. Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali (Surabhi)

1. A. Pullaiah & Dhanalaxmi Bai

2. S.A. Baba Rao

3. S.A. Ram Mohan

Founded in 1935 by Smt. Dhanalaxmi Bai, daughter of Govinda Rao, and Bharata Natyopadhyaya Aveti Pullaiah, son of Smt. Papabai, the first known Telugu actress on the stage, this company is active since its inception. Their eldest son Baba Rao took over the management in 1947 and with the help of his four brothers elevated it as one of the front-ranking Surabhi companies. The brothers were together for quite sometime before each one (except Prakasa Rao, the second son) had started his own company.

Baba Rao is a recognized harmonist of great calibre besides being a versatile actor. He is at his best as Arjuna in *Kurukshetram*, Balarama in *Maya Bazar* and Ravana in *Bhookailas*. He was the President of the Surabi Nataka Kala Sangham for a long time. The second son was S.A. Prakash or Prakasa Rao who was a highly talented actor and was honoured for his virtuosity in acting by several cultural organizations all over Andhra. His memorable roles included Sri Krishna in *Kurukshetram*, Harischandra in the



Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali with Aveti Pullaiah,
Dhanalaxmi and their children

play of the same title and as Narada in *Sati Anasuya*. Both of them were honoured by Andhra Nataka Kala Parishath and the Government of Andhra Pradesh. Chandra Rao, the third son, was a well-known technical expert and was also known for the portrayal of Rakshasa characters like Ghatotkacha in *Maya Bazar* and Mayala Marathi in *Balanagamma*. The fourth one, Leela Paparao is a good harmonist and music-director and has also acted in comic roles. Veera Bahu in *Harischandra*, Laxmana Kumara in *Maya Bazar* and Uttara Kumara in *Kurukshetram* were his favourite roles. In later years however, he got a name for his portrayal of the role of Shirdi Sai Baba, a play he himself had written and produced under his own banner.

Among the women, Dhanalaxmi Bai herself was an actress who had acted both male and female roles with equal ability. Sakuntala, wife of Prakasa Rao, played the lead roles for a long time. Sakuntala was also honoured with the title 'Gana Kokila'. Baba Rao's wife Koteswari played other important female roles. The Company had a strength of 70 members and they performed all the major Surabhi plays drawn from mythology and folklore. Baba Rao specially

commissioned plays to be written for his company which included *Kurukshetram*, *Maya Bazar*, *Bhookailas*, *Deva Das* and *Guna Sundari Katha* written by Viswanatha Kaviraju and his brother Malladi Venkatakrishna Sarma, keeping in view the actors of the company and their potentialities.

Chandra Rao and Papa Rao later started their own companies which were active for sometime. However Baba Rao's son, Rama Mohan Rao, who inherited the company, manages it now which is actively performing in Telangana districts. He is currently the President of the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham after his father, Baba Rao, relinquished the position.

3. Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali (Surabhi)

1. R. Peda Venkata Rao & China Venkata Rao
2. R. China Venkata Rao & Subhadramma
3. Dasarathi Rao & Bhojaraju
4. R. Nageswara Rao (Babji)

This Company was started in 1933 by Rekandar Peda Venkata Rao, a nephew of Govinda Rao, and was later taken over in 1937 by his brother Rekandar China Venkatarao who was the first president of the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham. His wife Subhadramma, daughter of Govinda Rao and Laxamma was an actress of great potentialities and acted with equal facility both male and female roles. She could show her excellent histrionic talents in demon roles like Yama and Hiranyakasipa as well as women's roles of *sattvika* type such as Sita and Anasuya. She was also good at training her company members both in acting, singing and in stage management. She was also popular as a singer and had given private gramophone records. She was honoured by the Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad. Her husband, China Venkata Rao acquitted himself well as a good comic actor.

Their sons, Dasarathi Rao and Bhoja Raju took over the company from their parents and the company is now ably run by



Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali

Rekandar Nageswara Rao (Babji), the third son. Dasarathi Rao was a noted harmonist and also good in comic roles. He left the profession and settled down in Vizianagaram. He now retired from active work. Bhoja Raju did all the major roles besides being a good costume designer and backstage expert. Unfortunately he passed away recently, which is a great loss to the company. Their third son, Nageswara Rao, took over the management of the company and proved his worth as a benevolent manager. He has specialized in the roles of Rama and Krishna in *Lava Kusa* and *Srikrishna Leelalu* respectively. Chaya Devi, wife of Dasarathi Rao and Anasuya Devi, wife of Bhoja Raju played all the important female roles. Vanarasa Venkoji Rao, husband of Bhuvanalexmi Devi, daughter of China Venkata Rao played the male lead roles. This company which is one of the five companies active today has about 60 members. *Mayabazar*, *Kurukshetram*, *Balanagamma*, *Gangavatharanam*, *Sati Anasuya*, *Srikrishna Leelalu* and *Lava Kusa* were some of the mythological plays in the company's repertoire and *Krishna Veni* and *Miss. Prema B.A.* were the two social plays performed by them earlier. They were also adept in performing historical plays like *Bobbili Yuddham* and plays based



Rekandar China Venkata Rao and Subhadramma who founded the Venkateswara Natya Mandali

on folklore like *Kantamathi*. They also perform *Brahmamgari Charitra*, the story of a saint known for his miracles and his supernatural powers.

This company had the unique fortune of being trained by B.V. Karanth, an internationally renowned theatre personality. He directed three plays for them – *Bhishma*, *Chandipriya* and *Basti Devata Yadamma* sponsored by the National School of Drama and “Alarippu”, a voluntary organization for the empowerment of women respectively. All the three plays won applause. This company has the credit of performing plays all over the country and is known for its old-time flavour.

4. Sri Rama Satyanarayana Natya Mandali

1. Vanarasa Vazir Rao

2. Vanarasa (Janagam) Ramaiah

This is a well-known company which is, in fact, an extension of the earlier company which was known as Sri Sarada Manovindini Natya Mandali owned by Vazir Rao. This company was started in 1928 and wound up in 1942. Later Vazir Rao's son, Vanarasa Ramaiah (popularly called Jangam Ramaiah) re-started this company in 1953.

Ramaiah played comic and villainous roles with equal ease. He was also a noted harmonist. His wife Ramadevi, an experienced actress with proven abilities took the leading female roles. Ramaiah's sister Subbamma and her husband R. Venkateswara Rao played the roles of the hero and heroine. Ramaiah always liked to equip his theatre well and had a spirit of adventure. With sixty members, young and old, it had its own complete modern equipment and had fifteen plays in its repertoire. It was wound up in the early 80's.

5. Sri Sarada Natya Mandali and New Poornananda Dramatic Theatres (Surabhi)

1. Aveti Venkata Swamy
2. A. Ramaiah
A.Nageswara Rao
A.Prasada Rao
A. Chalapati Rao
3. Aveti Nageswara Rao
4. S.A. Manohar



Aveti Venkata Swamy

Aveti Venkataswamy and his family started a theatre company in 1934 and called it Sri Sarada Natya Mandali. His sons Ramaiah

and Nageswara Rao, Prasada Rao and Chalapati Rao (all of them sons-in-law of Govinda Rao) were all associated with it. Nageswara Rao and Poornima played male and female lead roles. Their performances were of a high standard and were received well.

However, in 1943 the brothers got separated and each one started his own company. Ramaiah and his wife Poornima managed the company, Sri Sarada Natya Mandali for a short while. Nageswara Rao and his wife Challayamma started "New Poornananda Dramatic Theatres." Prasada Rao and Chalapati Rao started another company and in a short while, they also got separated and started two companies - Gajapati Natya Mandali and Govardhana Natya Mandali. All of them flourished and were active between 1943 and 1980. The last two companies were wound up and New Poornananda was wound up by 1990.

Nageswara Rao's "New Poornananda Dramatic Theatres" was one of the most active companies in the 50's and 60's. Nageswara Rao was an educated-manager and introduced several important innovations in the running of his company. He and his wife, Challayamma were popular actors. They were responsible for introducing new plays into their repertoire. Nageswara Rao was also active in getting social and historical scripts in addition to the earlier mythological and folk plays. The company requested Malladi Venkata Krishna Sarma, a veteran playwright, to write plays to suit their company's actors. Sarma wrote 9 plays for the Company: *Abhagini*, a social play, *Kalapahad*, a folk play, *Balanagamma*, a play based on a local legend, (rewritten for the company) *Dakshayagnam*, *Lavakusa* and *Dasavataaraalu*, mythological plays; *Sri Krishna Devarayalu*, a historical play, and *Vasanthasena*, an adaptation of Sudraka's *Mrichakatika*. Nageswara Rao was hailed as an innovative actor for the variety of roles he presented and for the liveliness with which he had portrayed the characters.

Nageswara Rao played the leading roles in all the plays, but was especially remembered for his performances as Mayala



New Poornananda Dramatic Theatres



V. Jaya Rama Rao



R. Kotaiah



R. Sambhulingam

The three actors are from
Sri Vijaya Natya Mandali

Marathi in *Balanagamma*, Sri Mahavishnu in *Dasavataramulu*, Charudatta and Sakara in *Mrichakatika*. His wife played the roles of Balanagamma, Seetha and Vasanthasena with credit. Janaki Devi, Nageswara Rao's sister, a versatile actress, capable of performing both male and female roles with equal ease, took up the other important roles. Each one of these notable actors was honoured with titles and purses by several organizations in Andhra. Janaki Devi's husband Eswara Rao was a noted harmonist and served several well-known organisations outside Surabhi also.

Nageswara Rao was responsible for consolidating all the Surabhi theatre groups and founded the "Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham", the apex organization which affiliates all individual companies and attends to their common problems. Nageswara Rao served it as the first Organizing Secretary.

When Nageswara Rao passed away in 1967, his son Manohar, an actor with proven abilities, and a man of finer sensibilities, managed the company for nearly 20 years. His wife, Sumathi, who took the female lead roles acquitted herself creditably. His unexpected and sudden death at a young age while performing the role of Balarama in *Maya Bazar* was a loss to the Surabhi fraternity. Manohar was the treasurer of the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham and was always willing to help the other companies whenever they needed such help.

6. Sri Vijaya Natya Mandali

1. R. Kotaiah

V. Jaya Rama Rao

2. R. Sambhulingam

This company was managed by Rekandar Kotaiah and Vanarasa Jaya Rama Rao. Both of them were noted actors. They also had the advantage of an able actor like Andhe Mallikarjuna Rao doing major male roles. Kotaiah's wife Anjanamma played female lead roles. Kotaiah, besides doing small roles, managed the company exceedingly well. They obtained the latest machinery both in lighting and stage effects and had equipped itself with all the accessories needed for a hall holding 1500 spectators. They had

about 50 actors in their company, one of the largest. The most important plays produced by this group were *Gayopakhyanam*, *Kurukshetram*, *Balanagamma*, *Keelugurram* and *Patala Bhairavi*.

This company toured mainly in the Telangana districts. It was wound up in mid – 70's.

7. Sri Govardhana Natya Mandali (Surabhi)



1. A. Chalapati Rao & Nagalaxmi

This company was started by Aveti Prasada Rao and Chalapati Rao, brothers of Aveti Nageswara Rao. Later they got separated and started two different companies. Chalapati Rao, who inherited the name, was a talented actor in humorous roles and was known for his backstage work. He was particularly known for his effective "transformation scenes" making judicious use of lighting. His wife Nagalaxmi, daughter of Govinda Rao, did all the heroine's roles. Navaratnam, an actor from outside, played the villains' roles, and Koteswara Rao, an outside actor played the lead roles.

This company also had about 15 plays in its repertoire which included *Kurukshetram*, *Balanagamma*, *Harischandra*, *Kanakatara* and *Krishna Leelalu*.

This was also wound up in late 70's.

8. Sri Gajapati Natya Mandali (Surabhi)

1. Aveti Prasada Rao & Santakumari

2. Aveti Ramana Kumar

This company was started by Aveti Prasada Rao, son of Venkataswamy. He was a good tabla player and also enacted



Sri Gajapati Natya Mandali members with Ramana Kumar and Shyam Sunder

humorous roles. His wife Santha Kumari, daughter of Govinda Rao did important female roles and known to be versatile in both male and female roles. When the Govardhana Natya Mandali got divided, Chalapati Rao inherited the company's name and Prasada Rao started the Gajapati Natya Mandali. After Prasada Rao, his elder son Ramana Kumar became the manager of the company. Ramana Kumar was known as a master-harmonist and was the company's music director. His wife, Hitamati Devi played all important female roles. Kali Vara Prasada Rao and Shymala Rao, two outside actors known for their singing abilities were in the male lead from time to time.

The company excelled in playing all the important plays in the Surabhi repertoire, especially *Maya Bazar* and *Balanagamma*. Ramana Kumar's younger brother, Shyam Sundar, played all the *rakshasa* roles with great *elan*. He was also a good organizer, having served the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham as its secretary. The Company suffered a loss when Shyam Sundar died at a young age and the Company slowly became extinct in 1980's.

9. Sri Sarada Manovinodini Natya Kala Mandali (Surabhi)

1. Vanarasa China Ramaiah
2. V. Abbaji Rao

The first Surabhi Company, Sarada Manovinodini Sabha was taken over by Vanarasa China Ramaiah, a versatile actor and painter, when Govinda Rao started his own company, Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali in 1927. However when China Ramaiah relinquished his proprietorship in 1940 his sons Uttam Rao and Abbaji Rao took over the reins. Uttam Rao left the company soon.



Sri Sarada Manovinodini with V. Abbaji Rao and the actors

However, when Abbaji Rao started his own company he changed the name to Sri Sarada Manovinodini Natya Kala Mandali. Abbaji was a good actor and played the lead roles. His wife Seetamahalahaxmi played the roles of the heroine.

Harischandra, Balanagamma, Kanakatara, Krishnaleelalu and other prominent Surabhi plays of yester years formed the repertoire of this company. It had 60 members and was well equipped with the necessary technical tools. It was however wound up in 70's when Abbaji Rao suffered heavy losses.

10. Sri Vasundhara Natya Mandali

1. A. Ramachandra Rao & Vasundhara (Shanmukhamma)



Vasundhara Natya Mandali :
Aveti Rama Chandra Rao and Vasundhara Devi with actors

Smt. Vasundhara Devi (alias Shanmukhamma), daughter of Govinda Rao and her husband Aveti Ramachandra Rao were the owners of this company. The company ran for about ten years performing traditional Surabhi plays like *Harischandra*, *Balanagamma*, *Krishnaleelalu* and *Chintamani* and was wound up in the late 50's. Ramachandra Rao used to employ actors from outside, especially those well known in and around the areas where they camped.

Vasundhara Devi was known for her *rakshasa* roles, though she also showed her merit as a heroine who could express delicate emotions of love and sorrow.

Two more active Companies from Telangana

Besides Sri Vijaya Natya Mandali, two groups, which were not listed by 1960, were active in the Telangana region - Sri Sarada Prasanna Kala Mandali and Sri Sarada Prasanna Natya Mandali - belonging to two brothers, Rekandar Venkata Rao and Rekandar (Madala) Narayana Rao. Both of them learnt their art from Kambala Lakshmi Narayana and founded two companies which made a name in the Telangana region with a large number of performances at each centre.



R. Venkata Rao



Narendra

Rekandar Venkata Rao, born in 1913, entered the stage when he was seven years old and did the roles of child characters and graduated into doing all the major roles of the Surabhi repertoire with creditable success. Venkata Rao was both an actor of merit and able technician. His son, Narendra who followed in his father's foot steps also did major roles like Ravana, Ghatotkacha, Manmadha and Veerabrahmam. He also penned the script of the play *Veerabrahmam gari Charitra* and directed it. This group was active until 1988.

Saradamma



R. Narayana Rao

Venkata Rao's brother, Rekandar Narayana Rao was a prolific performer and kept afloat the Surabhi flag in the Telangana region. He became popular with plays like *Chintamani* and *Balanagamma*, in which his wife Saradamma took major female roles. He holds the record for the highest number of shows of a single Surabhi play at a single place, Huzurabad, by giving 155 performances of *Veerabrahmam gari Charitra* at a stretch.



Aveti Venkata Swamy's sons and daughters and the family which in course of time led to the establishment of four Surabhi companies

Other Minor Companies

In addition to these major companies, there were 26 minor companies that sprang up from time to time. As recorded in 1956 when the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham was started, these 26 companies flourished in village centres. The reasons for such companies to be founded were twofold : firstly, an able couple, weaning away from the original company, desired to raise their own company ; and secondly, the audience in the rural areas of Andhra accorded these companies warm reception. This was a time, especially between 1935 and 1945, when cinema was becoming popular in towns and cities and Surabhi was the rural people's alternative to cinema. It is interesting to note that during 1950 and 1955, several Surabhi stage plays, performed in the rural areas, were modelled on the popular movies of the times. Movies like *Patala Bhairavi* and *Balanagamma* were such movies. This was the reverse of what had happened in the earlier generation, from 1935 to 1945 when the movies freely borrowed from the stage plays made popular by the Surabhi people, such as *Lavakusa*, *Sati Savitri*, *Sati Anasuya*, *Kurukeshatram*, *Mahabharatam*, etc.

Besides the *Ten* major companies as on 1956 there were 26 minor companies managed by the following people as proprietors:

1. Aveti Ramaiah & Poornima
2. R. Venkoba Rao
3. R. Pullaiah & Sambhulingam
4. V. Venkoba Rao
5. R. Kamakshi Bhai
6. V. Mohan Rao
7. V. Chakrapani
8. V. China Veeranjanyulu
9. R. Satyanarayana Rao
10. V. Tirupati Rao
11. V. Ramachandra Rao
12. R. Venkata Rao
13. V. Koteswara Rao
14. V. Padmavati Bai
15. V. Gouri Bai
16. R. Maneswara Rao
17. R. Laxmana Rao
18. A. Venkata Rao
19. V. Neelaveni Bai
20. R. Jaya Rama Rao
21. R. Manorama
22. V. Satyanarayana
23. S. Reddappa
24. S. Reddanna
25. V. Vithobha Rao
26. R. Tulasi Rao

However several other companies, both major and minor, have flourished in 1940's. Since they were wound up by 1956, they were not listed in the records of the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham as

existing companies. Some of the major groups which flourished between 1930-56 may be listed here:

No.	Name of the Surabhi Troupe	Proprietor
1.	Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha (The three brothers together : 1889-1910 and separately 1910-1927)	Vanarasa Venkoji Vanarasa Krishnaji Vanarasa Peda Ramaiah
2.	Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta Nataka Sabha (1928-1932)	Aveti Papabai
3.	Sri Sarada Manovinodini Nataka Mandali (1927-40)	Vanarasa China Ramaiah
4.	Ramabai Surabhi Nataka Mandali ?	Vanarasa Ramabai, wife of Peda Ramaiah
5.	Venkubai Surabhi Nataka Mandali ?	Venkubai, wife of Krishnaji
6.	Company started by Chinna Subbamma (Name not known)	Chinna Subbamma, wife of Venkoji

Until 1910 there was only one Surabhi group, Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha. This was when the three active brothers of the family – Venkoji, Krishnaji and Peda Ramaiah – decided to part ways. But each one kept the Company's name the same. However, there was no clash of interests because each group was functioning in a separate area of the State. So by 1910 there were 3 groups with the same name. When Peda Ramaiah died in 1914, Papabai continued as proprietrix of the same company, but with a changed name given to the company - Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sangeetha Nataka Sabha. These three companies continued until 1927 when China Ramaiah and Govinda Rao decided to part ways. Govinda Rao left the original company's name to China Ramaiah and started a new Company, Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali. In fact, this was the first company that got a separate name since all the others had retained at least a part of the original name. In 1928, on the death of Krishnaji, Venkubai, his fourth wife and an expert singer, started her own company and managed it only for a

short while. It was called Venkubai Surabhi Nataka Mandali. Similarly Peda Ramaiah's wife, Ramabai, also reared a company, named after her, for a short while.

In the long and adventurous life of the Surabhi groups, several other companies were strated, but had to be wound up soon because of the failure of the managers to cope up with competition. There was no detailed list of such short-lived companies.

Similarly several Surabhi families in Telangana, the area which was bequeathed to Krishnaji when the brothers separated in 1910, started their companies. Major among them were Vanarasa Abbaji Rao's Sri Sarada Manovinodini Natya Kala Mandali, and Vanarasa Vazir Rao's Sri Sarada Manovinodini Samajam, Madasu Narayana Rao's Sri Muralidhara Natya Mandali, Vadala Narayana Rao and Vanarasa Venkata Rao's Sri Sarada Prasanna Natya Mandali and Vanarasa Narayana Rao's Kusumananda Dramatic Theatre.

Kamala Vilasa Nataka Mandali, though initially not connected with the major Surabhi tradition, has had long innings. Started by Rekandar Rama Rao and later continued by the sons Rekandar Koteswara Rao and Rama Chandra Rao, the company was taken over by Rekandar Narasimha Rao, an actor who played female



Narasimha Rao and his wife Sarojanamma

roles successfully who rechristened the company as Sri Vinayaka Natya Mandali and ran it successfully with the support of his wives Savitri and Sarojini, in 1971. This is one of the active associations now performing. It has the advantage of two enterprising sons of Narasimha Rao, Mohan Rao and Venugopala Rao and their families who are instrumental for its present activity.

Among the companies that lived only for a short while, but made a mark in the coastal Andhra region were Sri Sarada Natya Mandali of Sindhe Venkatappaiah and Narasamma (1932-45), another group with the same name Sri Sarada Natya Mandali (1934-1936) of Aveti Ramaiah and Poornima, Poornima Art Theatres (1942-1960) of Aveti Poornima and Parthasarathi Natya Mandali of Vanarasa Abbaji Rao.

Changing Trends between 1937 and 1956

The year 1937 was the year Govinda Rao withdrew himself from active theatre practice and 1956 was the year in which the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham, a consortium of the existing Surabhi companies, was started. According to the Sangham, there existed 10 major and 26 minor companies as on that day. What does this signify?

We can easily summarize the strengths and weaknesses of these companies. At the outset, the categorization of major and minor theatres itself explains the modalities. Some of the notable credit – worthy features of the major companies are adding new plays according to the changing trends and audience tastes, possessing infrastructural facilities and technical equipment to suit all the plays and the ability to sustain even if one or two camps fail.

Since its days of inception, Surabhi leaders thought that entertaining its audiences is its primary obligation. Towards achieving this, the first step taken by Peda Ramaiah and Govinda Rao was that new plays constantly joined the list of plays already being performed. New playwrights were approached. The only

criteria were whether a play reflected the changing times and whether it had the potential of good entertainment.

A major company has, in its fold, about 15 to 20 plays that would run for a month or two at one place. Some companies have 26 to 30 plays. Plays that are popular will be repeated again and again. *Veerabrahmam gari charitra* was given 155 shows in one village, a record. Twenty performances of *Balanagamma*, *Maya Bazar* and *Kurukshetram* in a single camp are common. Minor groups will have about 6 to 7 plays in their repertoire.

The repertoire reflected the changing tastes of the spectators. For a long time mythological plays dominated the scene for the success of which dazzling costumes, scintillating music and singing and nerve-racking stage effects contributed greatly. But slowly times changed. There has been an awareness regarding contemporary social issues and a general opinion that theatre also must reflect them. Surabhi companies immediately conceded the demand. Social plays like *Stree Samrajyam*, *Zamindar*, *Krishnaveni* and scores of other plays reflected this tendency. Good historical plays found a place of pride. Even the actors and actresses, though groomed on old-time techniques, easily accommodated themselves to the changing techniques. This amenability is one quality that kept the Surabhi groups refreshingly new all the time.

The Impact of the Existence of a Large Number of Companies

While the proliferation of the companies, in a way, showed the large number of Surabhi artists that wanted to take to theatre professionally, there were obvious drawbacks as well.

1. The first impact of such multiplication of the numbers was seen in the constantly changing composition of the teams. Artists, for the smallest reason, left a company and joined another. Some company managers, due to personal animosities, lured artists from another company by offering

them more remuneration. There was a free flow of artists from one company to the other though the major companies did not suffer much.

2. This naturally affected the quality of the plays because if an artist known for certain characters, was weaned away, it was difficult for the company to fill in the gap at once. Fortunately, the actors in the established companies were all-rounders and could take up any role within a short time. This helped to overcome such precarious situations in these companies.
3. The third change could be seen in the choice of scripts and the style of performance. In the first two generations play scripts were common. But later on plays were written exclusively for a particular company and others had to request writers to do similar texts for them. There were three or four different versions of a single play assigned to and written by a single writer. When this affected some companies, they challenged the script writers and other performing companies in court so that the personal rivalry and animosity spoiled the healthy atmosphere that existed until then.
4. There was also an obvious change in the performance style. Usually a Surabhi performance is known as a homogenous performance, giving equal emphasis to singing, acting and backstage effects. With the growth of the number of companies, and most of the companies not having capable actors, the managers resorted to imitate the contemporary trends prevalent in the 'Padya Natakam' – musical theatre – by giving emphasis to 'raga' elaboration of padyams (poems). Though such a rendering of poems sustained some companies due to their "singing" actors, many others had to close down soon. The second alternative for them was to rely upon the "tricks" and "effects". Such technical flashes became the most

important aspect of a Surabhi play so much that Surabhi is associated only with such “gimmicks”.

5. These companies were started more by actors and actresses who did not know how to manage a company. Lack of experience in running a commercial enterprise soon told on their finances and they had to wind up their companies.
6. Such large numbers also necessitated several, less efficient, companies to take shelter in rural areas.

NOTES

1. Dharmavaram Gopalacharyulu (1856-1942) whose play *Bhakta Ramadasu* was a raving success on the stage when it was first performed with Bellary Raghava as Ramadasu and Pandit Taranath as Kabir and has been a popular play on the stage ever since. He was also the author of several other plays including *Ram Kabir*, *Subhadra Parinayam*, *Premachandra Yogi* and *Rukmini Krishneeyam*. He also founded a theatre association, “Krishnamachary Sabha,” along with Bellary Raghava.
2. Venkubai Nataka Samajam was popular in the 20's as evidenced by the programme reviews published in *Andhra Patrika* (Daily), October 17, 1927 and August 10, 1928 and also a review of their production of *Kanakatara*, published in the same daily on October 17, 1927.
3. “Bhakta Pahlada”, the first Telugu talkie with Surabhi Kamalabai as Leelavathi and Surabhi Sindhuri Krishnaji as Pahlada was released in 1931.
4. Dr. P.S.R. Appa Rao, “Surabhi Nataka Samajamulu,” *Telugu Swatantra*, July 18, 1959, p.6.
5. “Fidelu” is a Telugu equivalent of “fiddle”, violin.
6. Rama Bai has been hailed for her excellent portrayals of both male and female roles. See especially the tributes paid by K.B. Bhaskara Dasudu from ‘Yel’ Village and Pisupati Chidambara Sastry, *Testimonials*, pp. 12-13 and p.10.
7. See *Saptati Sanchika*, pp. 7-11.
8. Malladi Venkata Krishna Sarma, “Surabhi Nataka Samajamulu,” *Natyakala, Vimsati Varshika Sanchika*, 1979 edited for A.P. Sangeet Nataka Akademi by M. Nagabhushana Sarma, pp. 87-89.

VI

CHANGING TIMES : EMERGENCE OF SURABHI AS RURAL THEATRE

Surabhi survived the economic onslaught during the depression days. The decade before World War II was crucial. On one side, Surabhi grew in strength since 1940. The way shown by Govinda Rao by grooming his daughters and sons-in-law in the art of the theatre, his successful installation of each one of them in their own theatres and helping them by sharing with them some of the essential materials needed, by financing them to buy equipment and materials for constructing a theatre house – these ideals were also shared by Govinda Rao's other cousins and so a healthy hierarchy of theatre groups headed by the major personalities of the early Vanarasa generations sustained for long.

However, when clashes of interests between brothers came in the way of continuing the companies, they were either closed, or branched off from the parent organization to start a new outfit, the actors migrating to other companies. Some of the companies that stood the test of time were those of Govinda Rao and his progeny and the Aveti and Rekandar families, some of them founded by Govinda Rao's daughters.

Added to the depression, there was the latest allurements in the form of cinema. Hitherto all the major towns and many of the

small towns boasted of separate theatre halls for performing stage dramas. The main stream 'musical' theatre (Padya natakam) was so popular that major singer-actors emerged as virtual rulers of the dramatic scene. Enterprising landlords found it profitable to start commercial theatre groups by enlisting the support of major actors drawn from all over the land and offering them lucrative sums as salaries, along with attractive perks.

When once the cinema – especially the talkie – was started, the professional groups had a set back. Many of the actors, who were already trained in the art of diction and expression, moved to the cinema field. The professional and semi-professional groups collapsed, for the better actors found a worthwhile reception in the movies and the average actors had been left out. The theatre halls were all converted into cinema halls. Within two years of the emergence of talkie, there was no dramatic hall that remained to perform stage dramas, except the local club-halls that were not run on commercial lines and belonged to a society; but these halls did not have the same facilities as in the theatre auditoria.

As far as the Surabhi theatre companies were concerned, this change had both a positive and a negative impact. The so-called negative impact was obvious: with the new craze for cinema, the companies slowly started to move into areas which were not within an easy reach of the cinema. This took them inevitably to the rural areas of Andhra.

The positive side of the new changes could be seen in several Surabhi actors and technicians gaining welcome entry into the cinema field. The first Telugu talkie – *Bhakta Prahlada*, 1932 – directed by H.M. Reddy and was shot at Calcutta starred a Surabhi stalwart as the first heroine of the Telugu cinema – Surabhi Kamala Bai. Kamala Bai, except for a short spell of organizing a theatre company of her own – remained in the cinema field all through her life, first as a heroine and then donning character roles. Similarly, the first Telugu talkie also starred Sindhe Krishnaji, a cousin of Kamala Bai, as Prahlada. As Krishnaji could not eke out

his livelihood in the cinemas, for child roles were not plenty, he came back to the companies, learnt music from 'Fidel' Hanumantha Rao and lived with one or the other Surabhi companies. In his later years, he lived in Baba Rao's Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali.

Several other Surabhi stars drifted from theatre to cinema from time to time, the most notable among them being Surabhi Balasaraswathi, a daughter of Aveti Dhanalaxmi Devi and sister of Baba Rao, who did character roles and left her mark in the field. Once in an year she would come back to her brother's company, Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali, and perform along with her other family actors some notable Surabhi plays, thereby bringing publicity and popularity to the Natya Mandali and also to continue to have a feeling that she belonged to this great tradition. Similarly, Aveti Poornima did a few stellar roles in cinema. So did S.A.Prakash and a few others.

Many Surabhi artists, especially female artists, filled in the gaps created the main-stream actors and musicians when they migrated to the cinema field. Poornima and Santha Kumari were the most prominent among such notable artists. Similarly several harmonists went to seek their fortunes in the main-stream theatre. The most notable among them was Aveti Baba Rao who did music to several of their own plays and also accompanied several singing actors on harmonium. Vanarasa Ramamohana Rao and Eswara Rao were others who worked for several associations as musicians.

Alternate Spaces for Performance : the Rural Theatres

As the cities and big towns were gripped with the "talkie fever" and as performing spaces in the cities and towns were converted into cinema halls, almost all the major professional and semi-professional theatre groups in the mainstream theatre were wound up. Many of them were professional groups founded with a profit motive. But, for the Surabhi professional groups, theatre is not a mere profit-seeking commercial enterprise. It is a family

profession. Many of them learnt the art since their childhood and lived on it. This has been their livelihood, passionately endowed as a profession and sacredly adhered to it as though to a hereditary avocation. Each company had also acquired equipment, furniture, infrastructural materials worth lakhs of rupees. If they did not follow the family profession, this acquisition was not worth a pie. Both necessity and love for the art forced them to seek alternate places to perform and earn a respectable living, rather than closing them and seeking alternate professions. They chose to go back to villages and towns which had no easy accessibility to cinema. Each company made a survey of such places in the districts they had performed and embarked upon a rural artistic journey.

The trend to move to villages had already set in, when there was a proliferation of Surabhi companies. All the kith and kin of the original Surabhi families thought it was profitable to start a theatre company and gave the villagers an easy fare of song, dance and 'effects'! Many new companies were started either due to internal dissensions within a company or animosities between two strong 'actors' in a company, or personal ambitions of actors. Knowing fully well the reasons for several rural theatre companies to start, the 'big' companies, which until now flourished in the towns, moved to places which were not occupied by the smaller theatres. They were aware that they were not in any way competitors to other Surabhi brethren; but, in fact, cinema was a competitor to both of them.

Contemporary Mainstream Theatre and Surabhi Theatre

Between 1930 and 1940 both contemporary Telugu theatre (which is called here 'the mainstream theatre'), and Surabhi theatre suffered from the sudden onslaught of cinema. Both responded to this in two different ways. While mainstream Telugu theatre was, by and large, an amateur enterprise with sporadic professional deviations, Surabhi theatre was out and out professional. So much so, winding up of the Musical theatre groups of the mainstream

theatre was not very difficult and involved no psychological trauma. Many of the actors migrated to the cinema field; some of them as heroes and others as important actors donning character roles. This was easy enough, for the Musical drama was never a cohesive group; it was individualistic both in conception and practice.

What was once a virile theatre activity popular in the nooks and corners of Andhra and inspired even the illiterate young villager, that musical, 'singing' theatre dwindled into a nonentity. While the major actors migrated to the cinema, the other actors who could sing well but could claim no other histrionic talent, were caught in a new framework of theatre activity initiated by some enterprising and imaginative contractors. The 'contract drama' was a stop-gap phenomenon, by which the singer-actors could get a new lease of life. Contractors, who 'contracted' a place for performance, also 'contracted' known actors from the nooks and corners of Andhra for a particular play on a particular night. Since one actor who was known for his Krishna's role came from Vizianagaram, one corner of Andhra, another actor whose Arjuna's role was hailed, was brought from another corner. This "assemblage" of actors took place at the time of the performance only. Since rehearsals and emotional rendering of dialogues were out of question, the actors relied on singing the poems elaborately. The actors singing their roles glued to a standing microphone before them went beyond any dictum of sane theatre. The contractors perhaps saved the actors from penury; but distorted all norms of theatre. Thus actors developed 'fan' clubs; cleats and "once-mores²" had become common and, more often than not, a performance ended in riots because of drunken actors, immoral contractors and riotous audience.

On the other hand, the Surabhi theatres, by and large, retained their homogeneity and composite culture. They still strove for a homogeneous performance. They always insisted that the play as a whole was more important than the individual actors. They never

advertised the 'greatness' of individual actors and aimed at a performance embedded with music, dance, humour and backstage tricks. They had also suffered the impact of cinema but not to such an extent as to close down their companies. They employed actors who were constantly moving from one company to the other, but there were others ready to fill in their places. The only adjustment they made was to move to the Taluq headquarters, leaving out the district centres for cinema. In fact, in some centres, they vied even with cinema performances and there were instances where cinema screening in a hall had to be stopped if there was a Surabhi performance!

Social Concerns

If we can categorize the decade between 1930 and 1940 as a decade of fluctuating fortunes of theatre activities in Andhra, the decade between 1940 and 1950 can be seen as one in which the realistic social concerns of the contemporary society reflected in drama. In 1929 the Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad (ANKP) was started with a view of bringing all the theatre practitioners on to one platform and also to encourage the productions with greater social consciousness. The men behind this historic event were



A court scene from *Stree Samrajyam*

Vanarasa Govinda Rao and Malladi Viswanatha Kaviraju. By 1930 the influence of Ibsen was seen. By 1943, when the ANKP announced competitions in social dramas, a new phase of Telugu drama was initiated. Between 1920 and 1930, however, social subjects were treated in the traditional dramatic format of 'Padya Natakam', though it was long debated whether the new realistic themes could appropriately be treated in the old style which fitted the mythological and historical subjects. However, we have telling examples of popular social plays written in the traditional format. Kallakuri Narayana Rao's *Vara Vikrayam*, *Chintamani* and *Madhuseva* were the foremost examples of this mixed genre. Others like Vedanta Kavi, Jampani Chandrasekhara Rao, Kopalle Venkataramana Rao and scores of others chose to write in the same format. They were all performed several times and received popular acclaim. On one hand social prose plays of P.V. Rajamannar, Narla Venkateswara Rao, and later of Atreya and several others invaded the amateur stages, the few semi-professional groups took upon themselves to perform musical plays with social concerns.

Prominent Surabhi groups never lagged behind in following popular desires. One after the other, the Surabhi groups invited their playwrights to write such plays for them. The first play was *Mahananda* written by Malladi Viswanatha Kaviraju (1930) and the second one was *Stree Samrajyam* (1932) by Kopparapu Subba Rao, both of them being written for Vanarasa Govinda Rao. *Mahananda* is not a "social" play as such; it is a play on rulers and their whimsicalities, but had an underlying thread of social criticism. In that sense, Kopparapu Subba Rao's *Stree Samrajyam* becomes the first complete social play attempted by a Surabhi company. Kaviraju also wrote *Zamindar*, the story of the fall of a feudal lord, for Aveti Venkataswamy. Similarly *First Class B.A.* by Hari Purushotham for S.A. Baba Rao had also been popular. None of these plays had remained long with the Surabhi groups since the rural audiences did not respond positively towards them! It looked as though they still wanted glittering scenes, dances and "tricks".

In spite of this occasional willingness of the Surabhi groups to include plays with social themes, they were not ready to have plays of a more liberal and 'progressive' ideology. In fact, the only rural theatre at the time was Praja Natya Mandali³ whose *Mundadugu* and *Maa Bhoomi* created history by organizing thousands of shows to lakhs of audiences. Their plays obviously leaned towards a more confrontational attitude, their ideology was left-oriented and the Surabhi groups could not afford such a confrontation either with the landlords or with the people.

Rural Theatre : New Challenges

Village theatres have had their own demands and expectations. Though Surabhi groups wanted to follow the mainstream theatre in choosing subjects of rural society, two other strategic reasons also influenced the Surabhi people to migrate to rural areas. It was becoming increasingly difficult to find vacant lands for erecting a theatre hall in the towns and also, the availability of electricity. Necessary permissions for leasing the land for constructing the hall and the living quarters were also difficult. Finding vacant lands and getting permission from Municipalities, from revenue officials and from the electricity department were becoming more strenuous than performing plays. Many of these problems were not so unsurmountable in villages as in towns. In fact, all these problems the Surabhi companies encountered to start a camp were presented with sincerity and frankness by Aveti Nageswara Rao, the then Secretary of the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham during its Seventieth Jubilee Celebrations at Tenali in the year 1960.

Not that the problems were less in villages. Each company had to take permission from the Panchayat for erecting a tent and to officially draw electricity for daily use. They had to pay a prescribed amount for this purpose. The money was to be paid in the mandal/taluk headquarters. Right from the Panchayat Sarpanch, Mandal Revenue Officer and even the electric lineman asked for favours. Even the slightest disapproval from the Manager would result in

the permission being rejected or delayed on one pretext or the other.

In his welcome address to the public on the occasion of the Saptati Mahotsavam of Surabhi theatres in 1960, the secretary of the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham, Aveti Nageswara Rao, bemoaned their plight due to bureaucratic indifference⁴:

We have limited our activities to the rural parts mainly and appeared rarely in urban areas. Staging for the city audiences has become an uphill task for us because of the difficult and delaying processes involved in obtaining the necessary licenses from the numerous departments and the trouble involved, to some extent, in obtaining suitable avenues. We are compelled to avoid cities, as our troupe of eighty has to live by our profession and cannot afford to spend three or four consecutive days without a performance.

Each one of our companies is equipped with a zinc sheet hall and dynamo of its own for generating electricity. Even then, we are unnecessarily forced to approach many a department for various licenses. The rules concerning the installation of stage and halls are framed with permanent halls in view, while the same are applied, while issuing licenses, even to touring concerns of our type with temporary zinc sheet halls and electric contrivances of our own. The 70 years of clear history of our Surabhi companies, with not even a single instance of accident or crime of any type, is a proof of our civic consciousness and respect for law and order.

This plea amply reveals the innumerable obstacles that confronted the Surabhi companies, even in villages.

However, the companies felt that it was certainly easier to get permissions in villages - for taking land on lease and other technical permissions than in towns. Besides, the villagers, when they once like a group, extend all facilities including supplying of vegetables, ghee, curd, etc., though they are also looked after well by the company managers by providing them free tickets or giving them prominent places to sit. By and large it is found more comfortable to put on shows in rural areas, though the exercise brought several qualitative changes in the Surabhi traditions.

1. Pattern of Viewership

One could easily infer that it was at this time during 1935-45, that the whole pattern of viewership had also changed. Hitherto, mythological plays of characters with supernatural powers, moral conflicts and 'lilas' of Gods and Goddesses were prominent even in the mainstream theatre. And so it was with the Surabhi audiences as well. Surabhi theatres had an edge over musical plays of other groups because they could show the supernatural incidents visually. Gods performing supernatural deeds - for example, Srikrishna sending his 'chakra' to kill Sisupala; Ghatotkacha carrying Sasirekha to his abode and the bed flying in the air, etc. were actually a part of Surabhi "effects". So, there was a near-believability in the characters and their doings. The village audiences liked such "tricks" more and more and the companies had to oblige.

However, the Surabhi people moved towards homogenous productions, while performing in towns. Though there were still "special effects", they became a natural part of the whole story with other elements like good acting, singing and hilarious comic scenes dominating. With their moving into rural areas, Surabhi companies had to get back to such performance strategies that attracted village audiences.

It is also to be conceded that the village audiences preferred mythologicals to historical and social plays. They even liked the folklore-based plays more than the histories and social plays.

Balalnagamma is a popular play performed by all the groups in the villages. Similarly 'bhakti' plays – especially the play – *Veerabrahmam gari Charitra* or *Shirdi Sai Mahatmyam* – have always been a thumping success. Those plays which have a strong dose of "tricks", showing the supernatural, are the ones the villagers liked most.

2. Easy Entertainment as the key factor

Surabhi's gradual migration into rural areas had resulted in shaping the structure of its plays and the same is followed even now. Previously, Surabhi theatres catered to a multipolar audience. It had all sections of towns people in its fold including intellectuals, workers, students and middle-class working men and their families. Especially, they saw to it that their dramas remained a total family entertainment. Good literary pieces were set to commendable presentations by well-knit, disciplined teams comprising of expert on-stage performers and off-stage technicians. It did not look for, or allowed improvisations of any sort and the actors were trained to adhere strictly to the given text.

The rural audiences looked at drama as mere entertainment. A play, according to them, must have good singing, often competing with the elaborate raga rendition as seen in the musical theatre tradition. It must not care for nuances in dialogue. Dialogues most invariably be rhetorical and loud. Emotions – anger, love, pathos – must be shown more overtly. Character conflicts must, more often than not, be direct confrontations, physical ones not excluded. Broad acting techniques, dialogues with double meanings attracted a larger audience. The existing rural theatre - the folk theatre – could not allow such deviation except in the words and actions of the comic character, the buffoon. By and large, folk theatre tended to be moralistic as it was close to rituals.

"Unless the demands were met, even Surabhi could not survive in rural Andhra" - so thought the Managers. They came to that conclusion when audiences whistled for an out-of-the-scene dance

in a court sequence or thundered with uproarious laughter when a comic character revelled in useless prattles. These guided the not-so-discriminating minds of some of the Managers of the new Surabhi companies to resort to these methods, to survive.

The Surabhi theatres also felt that they were at a disadvantageous position as far as stage singing was concerned. They never used raga - rendering so elaborately as the mainstream actors since it would undermine other important aspects of dramatic presentation.

But to make the singing of the poem with elaborate raga, continuing the raga even after the poem is over and believing that rendering of poems with elaborate ragas is an equivalent to the whole dramatic enjoyment has since percolated to the nooks and corners of the Telugu land. It is in this background of the wide popularity of the "Padya natakam" that we have to evaluate the new challenges that confronted the rural Surabhi theatres when they decided to stage their plays in the rural areas. Unlike in the cities and towns, where drama is looked at as a composite art, in villages drama is still a vehicle for rendering 'padyams' (poems) musically. The Surabhi theatres were never known for great singing talents after the first generation stalwarts like Papabai, China Subbamma and Ammannamma. Occasionally, actors like S.A. Prakash rendered poems with verve and dramatic equanimity. There have always been Surabhi women who acquitted themselves well both in song and poem. The necessity of fulfilling the demands of the audiences and the paucity of singing actors within their families naturally forced the new managers to engage outside talent to fill in the vacuum. Even in the early days, Subbadas came from outside and rendered help. In the days of Govinda Rao, T.Koteswara Rao, an accomplished actor, was brought into Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali, with which he stayed as a member of the family group for a long time. There were other well known actors that came into Surabhi from time to time, but the new exigencies demanded a greater participation by outside artists.

3. Melodramatic acting

As most of the plays performed by Surabhi people are moralistic in tone, conflict between “good” and “evil” becomes inevitable. This is exemplified in all god-centred plays. In acting out the roles of both the demons and gods, it has now become necessary to show “melodramatic” rendering of dialogues, loud and rhetorical. This is in contrast with subtle dialogue delivery of yester years. Similarly “physical” acting with a lot of movement of hand gestures is now needed to stress a point. Acrobatics are not ruled out. Long soliloquies, delivered with rhetorical overplay have become a part of some plays.

One saving grace in the changed perspective is, however, perceptible. If the same team which uses these methods comes to towns and plays to elitist and educated audiences, they censor these excesses and are able to stress on character development, convincing display of emotions and concentrate on action–reaction sequences.

4. Changed Repertoire

From among the 20 and odd plays that comprised the repertoire of all the major companies today, only seven or eight retained their popularity, with the rural audiences. Among the popular plays in rural areas, *Mayabazar*, *Balanagamma*, *Lavakusa*, *Sri Krishna Leelalu*, *Harischandra*, and *Veerabrahamam gari Charitra* are prominent. Dramas modelled on popular cinemas were specially got written with Surabhi “masala”. Plays like *Balanagamma*, *Patala Bhairavi* and *Keelugurram* were rewritten for the stage by several playwrights for different groups. The story of *Mayabazar* depicting Abhimanyu’s marriage with Sasirekha was in Surabhi’s repertoire for over half a century and much of the story line in the popular movie of that name borrowed incidents from the Surabhi play. The ‘leela’ plays of gods and miracle plays on saints have repeated performances. The reasons for this are obvious. Village audiences liked glittering costumes, broad



Costume Drama has become very popular both in villages and in towns

rhetoric, songs and dances and above all, tricks and gimmicks. Since minor companies did not have actors who showed singing and acting abilities, they often resorted to “tricks” which took the rural audiences by surprise.

Today's Priorities

The requirements, needs and priorities always determined any commercial enterprise. So is the case with the Surabhi theatres.

The broad structure of a Surabhi performance is now largely limited to quick changes of scenes, rhetorical dialogue delivery, glittering costumes, appearance and participation of a large number of actors from a two year old child to an eighty year old person, cinematic dances, “special effects”, fights and comic buffoonery. Buffoonery and comedy scenes were always a part of Surabhi performance. But such comedy has now been replaced by meaningless prattle and acrobatics and physical tomfoolery in some companies.

The unified production of an earlier generation is now missing due to the fact that the companies had to cater to the tastes of the



Gorgeous settings are another attraction

rural audiences. Old classics are slowly being replaced by “lila” plays again, *Shirdi Sai Mahatmyam* and *Veerabrahmam gari Charitra* almost dominating the list. Another reason for the repeated performances of these plays is due to the keen interest of some communities to sponsor such plays.

NOTES

1. The word “contract drama” is mainly concerned with a purely commercial venture when “contractors” summon actors from different parts of the state to a place of performance. They usually contacted the best known actor for each role for a specified play at a specified place on a specified date. The actors assemble in the evening and go on to the stage for a performance.

For more details about “contract” dramas, see P.S.R. Appa Rao *Telugu Nataka Vikasamu*, pp. 553-556.

2. The word “once-more” from the audience demands a particular actor to repeat the poem or the song he has just finished. Often this is to the great embarrassment of the actor and the larger part of the audience since even a “dead” character, is expected to rise up, sing the poem again, and fall dead.
3. Praja Natya Mandali is Andhra’s counterpart to Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) and has been active between 1944-48, when it was proscribed for its leftist leanings. Its production of *Maa Bhumi* created history by being

performed by the Central Andhra Committee, the district Mandalis and even the village troupes simultaneously, thus performing 10000 shows in three years (by several 'dalams').

Mikkilineni Radhakrishna Murthy, 'Prajaporata Rangasthalams Praja Natya Mandali,' *Natyakala* (1980), Special Issue on Telugu Theatre Centenary, edited by M. Nagabhushana Sarma, 1980.

4. Aveti Nageswara Rao, "Our Life, a Drama", *Surabhi Natika Saptathi Sanchika*, 1960. No pagination.
5. Some of the prominent actors who were not Surabhi people but acted in Surabhi Theatres are :

Raptati Subbadas	Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha
T. Koteswara Rao	...	Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali
Ande Mallikarjuna Rao	...	Sri Vijaya Natya Mandali
M. Narayana Reddy	...	Sri Vijaya Natya Mandali
Subbaiah Naidu	...	Sri Vijaya Natya Mandali
Koteswara Rao	...	Goverdhana Natya Mandali
Navaratnam	...	Goverdhana Natya Mandali

Many others came into all the Surabhi groups from time to time to earn their livelihood during a lean period or to help out a company in difficulties.

VII

THEATRES AT CROSSROADS : THE PRESENT PREDICAMENT

It has been almost 5 decades since the Surabhi theatres moved to rural areas. What happened in the last 5 decades both to the companies and the actors working in them would give us a lesson in entrepreneurship.

Very slowly, the smaller companies wound up their activities as they did not have either the financial backing or the strength of a large group. There was a constant inter-company migration, since the actors moved freely from one company to the other for the sake of monetary benefits. Hitherto both the managers and actors felt a psychological binding with the company. With the constant changes, this camaraderie was wiped off. Some of the new managers also behaved high-handedly and lost the confidence of the actors.

Added to these internal dissensions, there were also more pressing reasons for the winding up of some of the companies. A predominant one was the apathy of the Surabhi youngsters towards the uncertain means of theatre as their livelihood. They found that they were at the receiving end as far as the common facilities were concerned. They are far away from formal education and they and their children would be forced to lead the same kinds of lives while their own cousins in the outside world earned more

even if they worked as farm labour. Besides, some of the technically competent members moved to other areas such as providing technical help for dramatic and dance performances and working as free-lance actors and technicians. This is more prominently seen among Surabhi women. The number of competent actors and actresses within Surabhi is slowly dwindling. So there came a stage when many of the companies were wound up.

Other circumstances added to this sad predicament. Due to the help rendered by well-meaning bureaucrats and theatre enthusiasts, the government helped the establishment of large colonies for Surabhi artists. While it helped to ameliorate the economic conditions of these theatre artists, many of them took the advantage of a permanent home to do other profitable jobs. The two colonies – one situated in the outskirts of Bhongir of Nalgonda district and the other in Kukatpalli area of Hyderabad – have about 500 houses. Ninety percent of the people in these colonies left theatre activities though about forty percent of them depend on theatre-related activities on an individual basis, thus negating the family affinity that gave it an identity.

With receding interests of a large number of young Surabhi people and with dwindling finances involved in maintaining a viable and large group and the recent attractions of several television networking agencies, even the existing Surabhi companies are facing a threat of closure.

Five Existing Companies

It is gratifying that even under these pressing conditions there are five Surabhi companies that are engaged in doing theatre and theatre alone. Large expenditure in shifting the materials has become a major cause of concern. Like the unprotected labour, the Surabhi companies have nothing to fall back upon if unexpected rains devastate and inundate their areas or if someone falls sick and needs urgent medical care. Against these odds, five companies prod on to give the same old type of unified

productions. Many of the elders confide that they are continuing this activity not because they can make both ends meet, but because they do not know anything else to do!

1. Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali

Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali is the most active Surabhi theatre company today. Started by Rekandar Peda Venkata Rao and his brother, China Venkata Rao in 1933, the company was



Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali (the present group)

taken over, in 1937, by China Venkata Rao and his wife, Subhadramma, the eldest daughter of Vanarasa Govinda Rao and Laxmamma. Proficient both in male and female roles, Subhadramma soon brought stability to the Company with her resourceful administrative capabilities. She had imbibed all the managerial abilities of her father and put her company on a sound financial and artistic footing. She was also responsible for bringing in new plays into their repertoire. Plays like *Gangavataranam* gained prominence under her direction.

After her demise, her eldest son, Dasarathi Rao managed the company, following in his mother's foot steps. Dasarathi Rao is a reputed harmonist. Bhoja Raju, his younger brother managed it for sometime with care and ability. Boja Raju was a technician of rare abilities and was also an actor of good standing. Now the company is managed by Rekander Nageswara Rao, popularly called Babji, who has been an enterprising young man with lots of new ideas for the consolidation and purposeful continuity of the



R. Nageswara Rao (Babji),
manager of Sri Venkateswara
Natya Mandali and Secretary,
Surabhi Nataka Kala
Sangham

company. He is amiable and friendly with theatre groups outside the Surabhi fold and is known for helping others wherever he can. He and his brothers Ganapathi and Bharani steer the destinies of the company, with thoughtful ingenuity and careful planning. Babji's wife, Prema, is an ideal host and looks after the old and the young with maternal care.

Babji and the other managers have the advantage of the help and guidance of advisers like K.V. Ramana I.A.S. and Garimella Rama Murthy, who steered the fortunes of the companies to safe shores. Babji's company has a large number of young boys and girls who are specially trained in theatrical needs. A couple of them have even completed their post-graduation in theatre and are pursuing higher studies.

With the help of meaningful well-wishers, the company gained the advantage of undergoing training by the internationally-known theatre director, B.V. Karanth, a former director of the National School of Drama. He not only did workshops with them and trained them in contemporary theatre practices, but directed three plays for the company.

Another important area in which this Company has gained prominence is in their constant tours, both in Andhra and outside Andhra. Especially commendable is the company's efforts to revive

the old practice of performing in towns and cities. With the help of the State Department of Culture this Company is giving performances in Lalitha Kala Thoranam, Public Gardens, Hyderabad where the government has given them vacant land to erect their hall and perform there. Similarly, they also tour other cities like Visakhapatnam, Vijayawada and Tirupathi giving performances to packed houses. This change is especially welcome when the Surabhi companies have been relegated to remote rural places. Discerning audiences feel that the Company, when it got such opportunities, must live up to the expectations of learned audiences and strengthen its acting and singing abilities. With young girls and boys willing to learn and with a knowledgeable understanding manager, the company should again come up to the levels of the best Surabhi companies.

2. Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali



Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali (the present group)

Founded in 1933 by Dhanalaxmi Devi, daughter of Govinda Rao and her husband, Aveti Pullaiah, son of the illustrious singer-actress Aveti Papabai, the company has seventy years of glorious life, with successful tours and performances. Originally aided by



Aveti Rama Mohana Rao,
manager, Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya
Mandali and the present President
of Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham

her five sons and a daughter, all of them excellent actors, musicians and technicians, the Company remained a front-ranker for several decades. In course of time, the five brothers parted ways and had their independent units for sometime. The parent organization, bequeathed to the eldest son, Surabhi Aveti Baba Rao, was run by him for several years in spite of hurdles. Baba Rao, who is now 82 years, is still active and plays the harmonium with the same old vigour and imagination.

The Company is capable of presenting all the old-time classics of the Surabhi repertoire. Baba Rao himself was responsible for bringing in new plays like *Maya Bazar*, *Kurukshetram*, *Dakshayagnam* and *Lava Kusa*, especially written for him by the younger Malladi. Their *Dakshayagnam* and *Kurukshetram* are especially popular even with the city audiences.

As a renowned harmonist, Baba Rao saw to it that a band of musicians was trained under him. His younger brother, Leela Papa Rao was for sometime the company's harmonist before he started his own company when Baba Rao took to acting. Now Baba Rao is back with the harmonium leaving the on-stage roles to youngsters. He is assisted by his sons and sons-in-law. His son, Rama Mohan Rao manages the company now.

3. Sri Vinayaka Natya Mandali

Originally, this company was started as Kamala Vilasa Natya Mandali by Rekandar Rama Rao and his two sons R.Koteswara Rao and R.Ramachndra Rao at Bheemavaram and was inactive



Sri Vinayaka Natya Mandali with Rekandar Mohan Rao, his brother Venugopala Rao and the actors

for sometime. In 1971 Rekandar Narsimha Rao rechristened it as Sri Vinayaka Natya Mandali. This company specialized in performing old time mythological plays and also new plays on Gods and Saints.

Very few Surabhi actors did female roles, but Narasimha Rao - a versatile actor - played female roles and did full justice to them. He played female roles like Sangu (Balanagamma), Kantamathi, Balanagamma, etc. and quite a few male roles like Harischandra, Sri Rama, Kamsa, Yama, Narada, Srikrishna, Mayala Marathi, etc. with equal facility. He was also a good painter and set designer.

His sons Mohan Rao and Venugopala Rao now run the company with creditable success. The manager, Venugopal has a team of youngsters as well as old-timers who help the company to flourish. Their recent 8 month stay at Warangal, is a creditable record performing every alternate day. In addition, the company has also been performing successfully in bigger towns - a practice that was discontinued by the earlier generation of his parents.

Sri Vinayaka Natya Mandali has over fifteen plays in its repertoire and all of them are quite popular. It also has new plays like *Patala Bhairavi* and *Gunasundari Katha* having a folklorish bias and written specially for them. Success of these plays partly seemed to be due to dramatization of legends from popular



R. Venugopala Rao (left)
Vice-President of the
Surabhi Nataka Kala
Sangham and his brother
R. Mohana Rao



cinemas. Besides, the Company also commissioned plays on deities like Shridi Sai Baba, Sammakka and Saramma, whose festivals draw huge crowds in Warangal district.

This company took the services of a veteran actor-singer-pandit, Burra Subrahmanya Sastry, who stayed with the team at Karimnagar to train them in stage music, diction and direct a new play for them, *Shirdi Sai Mahatmyam*. They recently produced yet another new play, *Sri Venkateswara Mahatmyam*.

This company has also ventured into performing at Hyderabad and is doing well. It takes the help of several old time Surabhi people or those in other jobs in the evenings. The Company is still catering to the fantasy-loving audiences. With a devoted team of three brothers, their wives and children, this is one of the successful Surabhi companies today.

4. Vijaya Bharati Natya Mandali





Vanarasa Damodara Rao,
Manager, Sri Vijayabharati Natya
Mandali and Treasurer,
Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham

One of the existing Surabhi groups, Vijaya Bharati Natya Mandali, though started only in 1982, had a proud history behind. In fact, it is a continuation of the Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali founded by Vanarasa Govinda Rao. The company had been taken over by Govinda Rao's two sons, Subba Rao and Koteswara Rao. They ran the company for a long time. When the two brothers wanted to separate, Koteswara Rao got the name, Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali and Subba Rao and his sons started Vijaya Bharati Natya Mandali. Subba Rao's first son, Guruprasad, managed it for sometime. It is now being managed by Damodara Rao, Subba Rao's third son. The company had all the old plays in their repertoire. Since the two brothers separated, their personnel and equipment were also divided. Vijaya Bharati and Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali of Baba Rao help each other in productions in an unique way of sharing resources.

The productions have all the old time masterpieces and remind one of the old days when Govinda Rao and Subba Rao were at the helm of affairs and created history in Telugu theatre in 1920' and 30's.

5. Sri Bhanodaya Natya Mandali

Started in the year 2000, this Mandali was an offshoot of Vinayaka Natya Mandali. The founder, Rekandar Nageswara Rao, a younger brother of Rekandar Narsimha Rao of Sri Vinayaka Natya Mandali came out of the original company after the demise



Sri Bhanodaya Natya Mandali

of his brother and started this company. He and his four sons and their wives form the nucleus of this company with several cousins joining them from time to time. It has a limited number of plays



Rekandar Nageswara Rao (Manager)

in its repertoire, as it cannot perform “big” plays like *Kurukshetram* for want of personnel and equipment. Within its limited means, the company is doing well and at present, is stationed in Ranga Reddy district. Its major plays are *Satya Harischandra* and *Brahmam gari Charitra*.

Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham : the Apex Body

Though each Surabhi company is independent in its own functioning, all the Surabhi companies came under the banner of Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham in the year 1956, under the active leadership of late Aveti Nageswara Rao. The immediate purpose of the Sangham is to bring a sense of oneness among all the

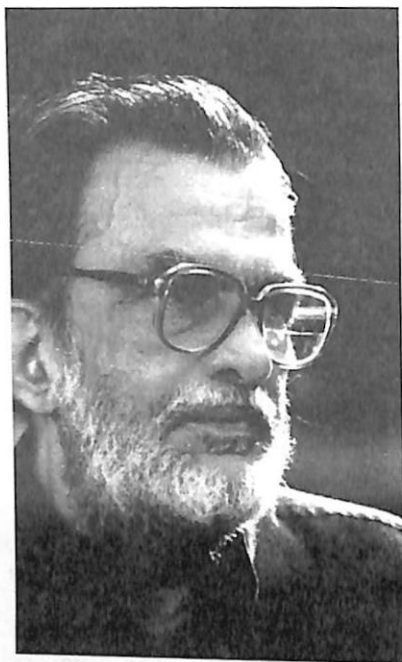
member-companies and give them help when needed. It had spearheaded several steps to ameliorate the working conditions of the Surabhi artists. The two colonies that came up in Bhongir and Hyderabad were largely due to the initiative of the Sangham. It also approaches government officials and other patrons for solving the problems of the companies and helping them further.

Eversince the Sangham's maiden festival in Tenali in 1960, it was regularly conducting the Surabhi Day on December 19 each year, the death anniversary of its founder, Vanarasa Govinda Rao. The Sangham celebrates the Day now in collaboration with the Telugu University, on which day Surabhi pioneers are remembered and deserving personalities honoured.

The membership of the Sangham, as envisaged by its founders, is limited to those companies which have a hall and equipment of their own and perform plays in one camp, staying there for a month or more and they continue to be professional, family groups. There are several other Surabhi artists and technicians that work in the theatre, on an individual basis, but since they do not perform plays as the Surabhi companies do, nor do they regularly perform as a professional group should and do not possess their own infrastructural facilities they are not admitted as members of the Sangham. It is meant to be a consortium of Surabhi companies, but not an affiliating body of Surabhi artists – either present or past.

Meaningful Interaction with Mainstream Theatre

Hundred years after the first Surabhi Company was christened by Raptati Subbadas as Sri Sarada Manovindini Sabha, there has been a healthy interaction with the mainstream theatre and with well placed theatre directors of national and international recognition. When B.V. Karanth, the well-known theatre director proposed to the National School of Drama that plays with modern sensibility should form a part of the Surabhi's repertoire, the authorities immediately conceded his request and started making preparations. The arrangement was that Karanth should do a



B.V. Karanth,
who worked with
Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali
for the production of three plays

workshop for Surabhi actors for a month and the end product of the workshop should be to produce a play in Telugu.

By and large the Surabhi theatre people are found withdrawn and contented. Their interaction with the outside world has always been courteous and friendly. Their treatment of theatre people outside is exceptionally reverential. Even from the days of Govinda Rao and Peda Ramaiah, there has always been an anxiety to please theatre people, poets and critics outside their fold. But professionally their attitude has been different. Their interaction with other theatre people is limited to paying their respects to them. Occasionally actors from the mainstream theatre used to be drawn into Surabhi companies. They were treated with respect and always made them feel homely. But a direct interaction in the way of theatre production has not taken place until, in 1996, B.V. Karanth, an honoured name in contemporary theatre, proposed that he would like to interact with Surabhi and work with them. This was when he was on a workshop assignment with the Department of Theatre Arts, Osmania University during which time we went to see Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali's

performance at Bhongir, where they were staging plays at that time.

It took nearly eight months to get things consolidated. The National School of Drama, New Delhi came forward to sponsor the workshop which would culminate in the production of a play. This was done through NSD's Regional Research Centre at Bangalore, whose Regional Director at the time was B. Jayashree, herself a noted theatre director and actress and grand daughter of Gubbi Veeranna, the illustrious proprietor of Karnataka's Gubbi Company. She was the co-ordinator for the implementation of the scheme. The workshop was conducted for a month at Bommala Ramaram, where the Surabhi group, Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali, was then camping. The play selected for performance was *Bhishma*, a Bengali play by D.L. Roy translated into Telugu by Andra Samba Murthy, a poet-dramatist well versed with the needs of the Surabhi groups and directed by Karanth¹. The group chosen was Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali and Garimella Rama Murthy² was the local co-ordinator.

Starting his career at the age of 12 with Gubbi Company, the most popular company of Karnataka, B.V. Karanth travelled a full circle from Gubbi Company to Surabhi, passing through National School of Drama, New Delhi, Bharat Bhawan, Bhopal, and Rangayana, Mysore. He had the unique ability to transform any literary piece into theatre through music, to be precise, theatre music. Trained in classical music his strength lay in his knowledge of folk forms and music of almost all the regions of the country. This helped him surpass the language barriers, while working in theatre. A recipient of Padmashree Award, B.V. Karanth had served many institutions in the country in various capacities. His search in theatre made him very active, very significant, and most relevant in Indian theatre.

Bhishma is a play that stressed the selfless attitude of the mythological hero, whose life is traced from his life through his death and the last moments of his life. Vasantha Rao as Bhishma

and his father Bhoja Raju as Dasaraju gave commendable performances. With songs and poems tuned sonorously by Karanth, the play was a treat, though general audience feel that it lacked the usual Surabhi glitter.

With the success of *Bhishma*, this result oriented combination of Karanth and Venkateswara Natya Mandali continued in the production of two more plays – *Chandipriya* in 1997 and *Basti Devata Yadamma* in 1998. Both the productions were preceded by a month-long workshop. Like *Bhishma* the other two plays also were performed in national festivals and were received well.

Chandipriya is based on a folk tale and upholds women power. Chandipriya, the daughter of a king, disowned by the father because of his apathy for the feminine, challenges and proves that a female child is no way less in mental or physical prowess than the male child. The story line was provided by Garimella Rama Murthy and the play written by Andra Samba Murthy and N. Jagga Rao.



A scene from *Basti Devatha Yadamma*

Basti Devata Yadamma, the outcome of a similar workshop for 30 days, was produced in 1998. The productions of both these plays, *Chandipriya* and *Basti Devata Yadamma*, were sponsored by Alarippu, an organization that worked for upholding women's equality and empowerment. Tripurari Sharma, an eminent director and a member of the faculty of the National School of Drama conceived both the projects and stood behind the process as a meaningful "transition agent". *Basti Devata Yadamma*, a translation of the famous play by Bertolt Brecht., *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, was translated into Telugu by Udaya Bhanu, a talented theatre director. Karanth, in his "Programme Notes"³ writes:

I did not try to take Surabhi people to Brecht, but brought Brecht to Surabhi. I sincerely believe that to save Surabhi from becoming extinct and irrelevant, is to save theatre. So Brecht becomes all the more important and meaningful for Surabhi.

The actors of Venkateswara Natya Mandali enjoyed the workshops and the subsequent productions. So did Karanth. For the young boys and girls of Surabhi this offered a unique experience. The music was something different from what the actors practised and presented. So were movement, sets and the production design. This interaction has a unique place in contemporary Telugu theatre.

But, having said that the entire process augured well for Surabhi, it is to be noted that these plays, experimental by themselves, do not belong to the "Surabhi" type. None of these plays proved successful when performed in villages and small towns. What one important critic commented on one of the productions might hold good to all the three plays: "It lacked the 'Surabhi' stamp." Karanth was trying to bring a modern sensibility through his approaches to production, but Surabhi's audiences are not yet ready to accept them. Perhaps a via media would be to do a modern play with contemporary consciousness, but still in

the Surabhi 'mould'. A play like *Macbeth*, with its moments of dramatic intensity, suspense and action, or Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, with its combination of realistic scenes and hilarious undertones of human pettiness at its ugliest moments and with great scope for Surabhi's wonderful recreation of settings would be ideal for performing either in the towns or in the villages.

Another Surabhi company also embarked upon an exercise similar to this. Sri Vinayaka Natya Mandali engaged Burra Subrahmanya Sastry, a veteran Telugu actor of the Pauranic plays and who has specialized in portraying female roles, spent some time with this company to train them in the production of *Shirdi Sai Mahatmyam*. These attempts remind us of the practice of the earlier playwrights who invariably trained the team until the first production was over.

However, other Surabhi groups rely more on the earlier plays they had practised and perform them in the style familiar to them.

NOTES

1. B.V. Karanth (1928-2003), one of the most well-known theatre personalities in the country was born in Kukkaje, South Canara District, Karnataka. Starting his career with Gubbi Company at the age of 12, Karanth was Director, National School of Drama, New Delhi, Ranga Mandal, Bhopal and Rangayana, Mysore. A recipient of "Padma Shri", Karanth worked with several institutions all over the country.
2. Garimella Rama Murthy (1936-2004), an ardent theatre lover and organizer, has been the adviser of all Surabhi groups and has done yeoman service in bringing Surabhi on to the national scenario.
3. "Programme Notes", for the play *Basthi Devatha Yadamma*, for Bharath Rang Mahotsav conducted by National School of Drama, New Delhi. The play was performed on 14th April, 1979.

VIII

'SURABHI' IN PERFORMANCE

Surabhi's popularity today depends more on the several performance strategies it adopts: quick-changing scenes, appropriate stage-area division, trick scenes and transfer scenes which reflect its abilities in technical perfection. A commercial venture like theirs depends on two things: minute care taken with regard to visual illusion and their constant vigilance on 'run-on' scenes. Besides, a lot of preliminary preparation and ground work go into the production of a Surabhi play. This ranges from the selection of a proper place for performance to consolidating all the inputs that go into a production. This also includes the PR work that is essential to familiarize themselves with the local leaders.

An understanding of the stage and its environs, the other components that form a part of a Surabhi production, will go a long way to appreciate the versatility, ease and single-minded devotion with which the Surabhi actors and backstage people work to enliven a production.

Selection of site and construction of an auditorium

A Surabhi theatre group normally performs 15 to 20 plays, usually on alternate days and stays at a place for two months or so. Some of the popular plays are repeated again on demand. It then moves to another 'convenient' village or town. What elements decide whether a place is convenient or not? Several factors are

to be taken into account. First of all, it should not be too far away from the present camp, for then transport charges would be too heavy. Each company will have to move with a 4-lorry load of materials and men. Added to it, the actors - including very aged and very young - will have to move to the next camp. In order to spend the transit charges, which sometimes would be to a tune of Rs.50,000/- to Rs.60,000/- companies will have to save that much of money or borrow it and repay from the revenues of the next camp.

The second criterion that decides a site selection is the availability of electricity and water nearby. The third and the most crucial factor is an open place that is suitable for a temporary auditorium to be built. An open place, usually adjoining a village or an open playground in the towns large enough to hold the hall, living quarters, stage, a canteen, two booking rooms and a room for holding the generator - in all, 150 yards in length and 130 yards in width is required. Open place, equal to the occupied and constructed places around the auditorium is insisted upon for engine installation. This permission will have to be given by the District Health Officer. Such a vast place is becoming impossible to be leased out even in villages, let alone in towns and cities. The practice is that the hall is constructed at the centre of the open space and a minimum of 50 yards of open place on each side is to be left in order to have proper ventilation and to guard against any mishaps in the hall.

The space is covered by make-shift walls prepared by arranging zinc sheets all around with three entrances - two for men and one for women separately. At the entrance of the open place is built a small room, again with zinc sheets and used as a booking office. In the front yard, facing the hall, are a cycle shop and a tea stall and on the rear side are toilets.

When Peda Ramaiah and Govinda Rao first erected the stage in 1901, the hall was a thatched shed with "lambada pattis", woven together, covering the sides. These pattis, each about 16" of width

were woven together and were hung around the sheds. They saw zinc sheets used by the Gubbi Company and replaced the lambada pattis with zinc sheets. The entire hall is covered by zinc sheets. Today, it takes about six to eight hours to erect a tent and an hour or two to dismantle it. This work that would normally employ 20 people, proficient in house building, will be done by the Surabhi technicians and backstage people themselves. This shows how tenacious and ingenious they are as theatre professionals.

The entire hall is divided into two parts – the stage and the auditorium. The auditorium is again divided into two parts. One third of the auditorium is for the first class ticket holders. Usually, a pit of three feet depth is dug to have chairs and benches. This is the highest class. The pit is a square ditch usually of 40ft. x 40ft. and would hold about 350 chairs and 100 benches. Besides, just before the stage, space is allotted for the harmonium, the tabla and the other instruments. The sand that is taken out after digging the pit is spread over the remaining part of the auditorium in a slope so that people sitting on the ground could easily see the performance. It means that the remaining part of the auditorium is “raked”. This part of the auditorium is again divided into two parts. One part is for the ‘mat’ seats. The third one is plain ground. Thus there are four types of seating segments, the chairs and benches in the pit (previously the pit provided room for both chairs and benches, but today they have only one class), the mats behind it and then the floor. There are entrances for all the three sections. The ‘mat’ is now eliminated, limiting the categories only to two: the chair and the floor. And, in very recent years even these two classes are eliminated. There is only one class and one flat ticket rate. Chairs are provided for all ticket holders.

The Stage

The theatre itself is 48 feet in width and 150 feet in length. The stage is 45 feet in width and 60 ft. in depth. The height of the stage is 30 ft., though at the proscenium opening, it is 10 ft. The 20 ft. above the proscenium arch is important because it is here

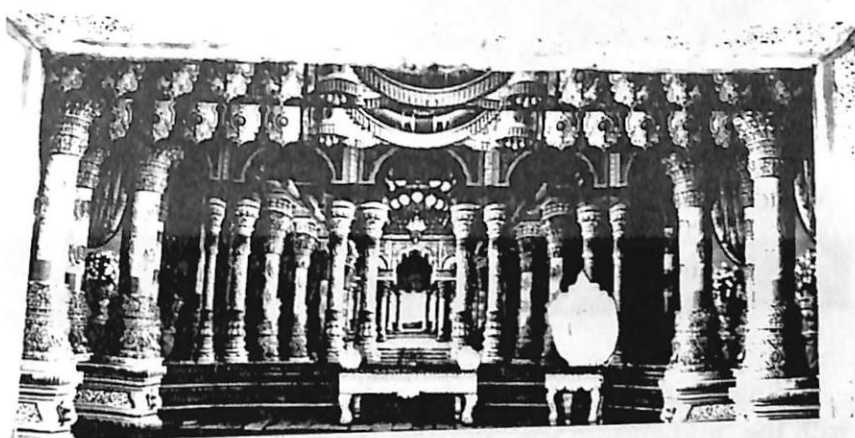
that the multiple curtains are stored; it is also a place used for Gods and saints to descend from heavens or disappear into thin air. It is from this place, above the flies, that Narada emerges from his ethereal world, the sleeping Sasirekha flies into the air and disappears when Ghatotkacha wills it so.

The space outside the theatre is on the same level as the stage level as it would facilitate chariots, carts and other things to be brought easily on to the stage.

The stage and the auditorium are a one-piece structure. The whole structure is covered with zinc-sheet walls with three openings. The roof of the auditorium is made up of zinc sheets tied usually with a rope or wire but not fixed with nails to enable the workers to dismantle the structure within a couple of hours.

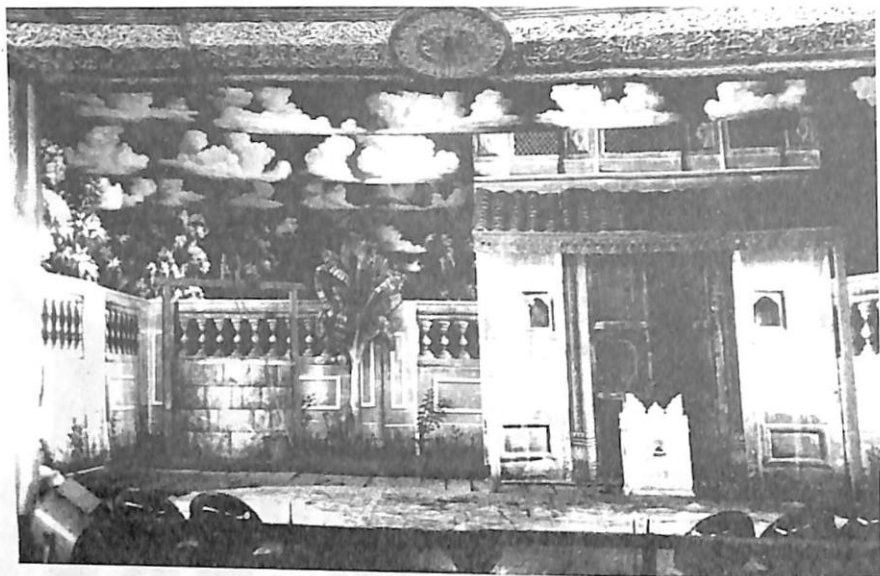
The stage level is 3-1/2 ft. high from the floor and the auditorium will have two parts - the pit and a raked ground. This facilitates all sections of audiences to have a fair view of the play. In the middle of the stage a 6 ft. wide x 3 ft. deep ditch is dug. This is like the Elizabethan 'stage-pit' and is called 'Bhugruham' or 'Bhoogaaram'. It is from this pit devils or angels suddenly appear and disappear. Two important examples may be mentioned here: Bali Chakravarthy is crushed into the earth by Vamana when Bali goes down the pit. Similarly, the 'Yagna Purusha' gives divine nectar to Dasaradha emerging out of this pit. The right side of the stage contains the electrical gadgets - the switch board, the dimmers and all special effect discs. The electrical system is fixed in the first left wing space, whereas in the second wing space is the sound system. The right side of the stage is usually allocated for entrances and exits. It also contains all the curtain ropes from where quick scene changes are operated.

As the entire play is staged against painted curtains, the Surabhi people soon found it necessary to convert the two-dimensional background into 'perspective' scenery background which will



A gorgeous Roya set

provide the illusion of a realistic three-dimensional setting. For this they add side wings to suit the back drop. If needed there are additional set-pieces which will go with the background. For example, if a forest scene is to be arranged, the background is a painted curtain. It can also have two curtains: one, a 'cut forest', the curtain having big holes to provide a deeper perspective from another forest curtain placed behind it. It shows such depth that anyone can mistake it to be a real forest. In addition, the side wings which are framed will match with the forest curtain. These with the two back curtains painted with forest scenes, two side wings painted as forest scenery give the scene a three-dimensional depth. They also add short painted wooden stands which are called 'bits'. They will be placed along the curtain line on the stage which will serve as grass or small bushes grown haphazardly on the ground. This completes the forest scene. So are the scenes of a palace or an interior of a house.



An exterior set

A huge durbar or the interiors of a royal palace is arranged with the mid-curtain with the perspective of the interior palace with painted pillars in the foreground, the side wings as decorative pillars in the forefront, presenting a grandiose palace hall. A trolley stage with a royal chair is pushed in. The chair is on a raised platform. This gives the total picture of a King's court. All major scenes are alternated by shorter scenes which will normally take place before the first curtain. Before the first curtain there will be a front curtain which is called 'ankam' and the family God or Goddess is painted on that curtain with the inscription of the company's name and logo. When once the 'ankam' goes up at the beginning of the play, it is not dropped until the end.

There are many curtains that would signify various backgrounds. Usually there are 14 curtains one behind the other and with the front curtain, the total will be fifteen. Three curtains are exclusively for the forest and the garden, three for an interior of a place (called 'Durbar' curtains), two for an interior of a room and the remaining suggesting various locales like a temple, a hill, a prison cell, etc. All these are moved almost in a fraction of a second. Such quick transformation of scenes takes place in

complete darkness. At the wink of an eye, you see a new scenery and a new locale! There will be at least six people that work in the backstage arranging the scenery and the properties. There will be two technicians in charge of lighting. Special effects will be taken care of by two more people. As and when necessary, more people would join them to make the scenes as effective and illusionistic as possible. In Surabhi, every actor is a technician and backstage worker and every worker is an actor!

One interesting feature of the Surabhi stage is that it is divided into 3 areas - not as the present-day proscenium stage is used i.e., horizontally - but laterally - i.e., from the proscenium arch to the first mid-curtain (this front part usually denotes a road, the front yard of a house or any small non-descript area), from the first mid-curtain to the second mid-curtain (the central part of the stage) and from the second mid-curtain to the back curtain. This lateral division - or the vertical division of the stage helps the Surabhi theatres to evolve scenes more and more in the interior to denote depth and also to sustain the illusion. The more you gain depth, the more is the illusion. The forest, the palace and the like thus gain an added advantage in creating an illusion. As the scenes are placed in the interior, the front part is given for decorating them with proper bits, side wings, flies or curtains. This also shows that two different scenes can be simultaneously shown - one in the front and the other in the back. This is the parallel scenery system very popular with the Surabhi groups. For example, Harischandra stands on the banks of the river and sees the corpses burning far away - the two scenes being separated by the use of lights and by an imaginative use of stage space laterally. Another significant example is the dream sequence of lovers who are at two different, far-off places. The love song of Abhimanyu and Sasirekha in *Maya Bazar* is a typical example of such a sequence. In a duet, for example, one is shown in the forests and the other in the palace and by switching off the lights in the

foreground area, Abhimanya is seen and after his bit of the song, lights are put off in that area and lights are on in the foreground wher Sashirekha, in her royal palace, continues the duet.

This particular vertical division also facilitates lighting the scenes, for the lights are hung separately for the first wing, second wing and the rear part of the stage.

Lighting

Lighting is an important component of a Surabhi production. "Light" not only sets the mood of a play, but also signifies the changing situations in each play. As scenes are short and transitions are quick, light or darkness will have to play a major role to create an illusion of reality, without apparently looking bizarre. In fact, many Surabhi "effects" are devised and manipulated by an intelligent use of different lights.

In the earliest days, Surabhi people used hand torches as were in vogue at the time. Then came the small kerosene lamps. In 1901 they saw a petromax light with two mantles when used for a theatre production in Narasaraopet and immediately ordered for two lights from Madras. These petromaxes, in addition to the kerosene lamps were suspended from the top. Special lighting effects were provided by coloured match sticks. Still later, by about 1926, dynamo lights were used.

In 1927, when Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali was started, the company used dynamo lights. Light and shade could then be provided by keeping in and taking off the lights from the stage. Then came the dimmers. In 1957 Surabhi people used water dimmers. By 1960 the present-day metallic dimmers replaced the earlier ones.

The Surabhi technicians use several lights - separately and in different combinations. The lights used by Surabhi companies usually consist of the following :

1. 20 footlights - each one with a 100W bulb.
2. 6 top lights - each with a 500W bulb. All these are spot lights and used for area lighting.
3. 2 plano - convex lights on stands on either side for special effects.
4. 2 halogens in the front half and 2 halogens in the back half of the stage for general lighting.
5. 2 spot lights on the two sides near the music pit, one on either side, to regulate the light, in important scenes. These lights serve as 'fillers' wherever necessary.
6. Two projectors - one in the auditorium which is used for pre-production visuals - especially those that show the name of the company, the founders' names and, if they think important, their photograph or painting, etc. The presiding deity of each group appears prominently on the front curtain. The other projector at the right of the stage is used like a spot light. All 'effect' discs are attached to this projector.
7. Separate switch boards are fixed for transfer scenes. The master board also has provisions for switching off either the auditorium lights or the stage lights or both.

The transfer scenes are managed when the stage is pitch dark. Only the expert eye of the stage technician can pierce through that darkness.

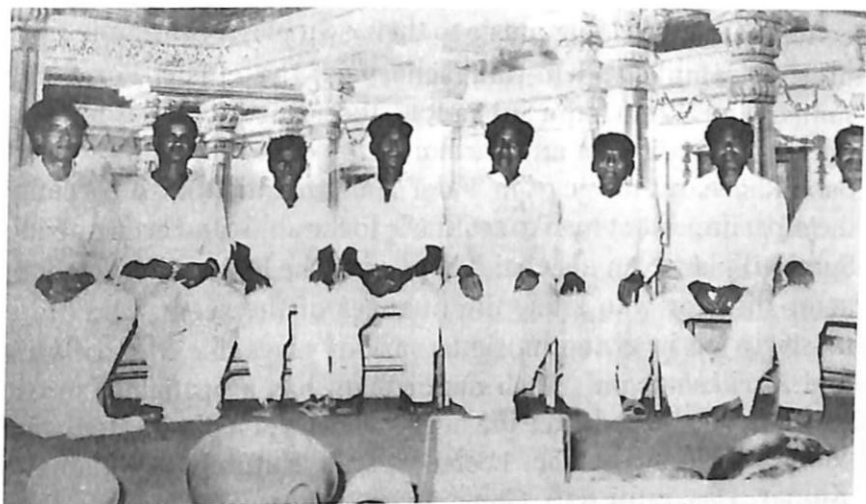
Lighting is deftly used in scenes of a ferocious nature, as in Ghatotkacha's entry or in Mayala Fakir invoking the demon-goddesses. Similarly, dream sequences are managed exceedingly well by using a gauze curtain which separates the scenes and with skillful lighting the two scenes look different as though they are taking place in two separate locales. The domination of 'reds' in ferocious scenes and 'blues' in dream scenes will inevitably be received with applause. Follow-on spots are used for special effects in some specific scenes. One such is Vasudeva carrying young Krishna from the prison cell to Brindavan.

Music

Music has been an inseparable component of Surabhi productions. In the early years of their theatre work, especially their initial production of *Keechaka Vadha* and the two plays they improvised Surabhi followed the puppet tradition, using more songs. All the actors who were not actually performing in a particular scene stood in the back of the stage along with the drone (*titti*) and the *maddela* and came forward when they had lines to deliver as in the Veedhi Bhagavatham of the rural areas. But with the arrival of Subbadas, things changed drastically. He kept the instruments in the wing, added a violin to the drone and the mridangam. Chorus was completely eliminated. Ragas were fixed to the poems and songs. The violin provided the background music and also 'bridge' music whenever there were scene changes.

Many of the early Surabhi actors and actresses were great singers. Peda Ramaiah, Papabai, Jhanjhuti Venkubai, China Ramaiah, Surabhi Kamalabai were all known for their singing abilities. Papabai swept away with honours mainly through her singing. In fact, Surabhi Kamala Bai was the first woman to give a gramophone record in Telugu. All Surabhi women exceeded their male counterparts in their musical and artistic attainment. Even later Dhanalaxmi Devi, Narasamma, Subhadramma, Santamma and Poornima and still later S.A. Prakash and Janakamma were veritable singers whose sound knowledge of stage music held them in high esteem. In the earlier days, Surabhi organizers gave so much of importance to music that they left six of their youngsters, both male and female, with the veteran musician of Machilipatnam, Kotaiah Devara, who willingly trained them both in vocal music and in violin for four years.

In 1901 they got a harmonium which was mainly used for 'sruti'. Later, in 1904, when the leg harmonium came into vogue the harmonium and the tabla (which came in the place of the mridangam) were shifted into the pit.



Surabhi Harmonists in the 50's

from left to right : S.L. Papa Rao, Ramana Kumar, Sindhe Krishnaji, Vanarasa Narayana Rao, Aveti Baba Rao, Vanarasa Gangadhara Rao, Kutumba Rao and Manmadha Rao

The music directors are as important to the Surabhi companies as playwrights. Usually trained Surabhi people alone were employed as music directors. When once the play is ready, technical work concerning the play starts. Along with it start the rehearsals. Even before the rehearsals the music is to be set. Usually it is the harmonist - music director that does the work of providing ragas and tunes to the songs and poems. If he is a mere harmonist and is ignorant about selecting ragas in accordance with the general mood of the play, the nature of the characters and the mood of the situation, a specialist is brought in.

The first director of the Surabhi company, Raptati Subbadas was a singer of great repute who knew classical music and he set tunes to the songs. Tadakaluri Kuppaswamy, a musician of high order and for long served as music director of the famous "Kalabhilashaka Nataka Sangam" of Marepalli Ramachandra Kavi, provided music for two of the plays of Kavi garu when they were given to Surabhi people. Besides he also gave music to two improvised plays. In fact during this time of setting music to the improvised plays that Krishnaji and Anjanappa learnt the

techniques of providing music to their own plays. Still some time later, Sriramulu and Kotilingachary set the music. For *Stree Samrajyam*, Kopparapu Subba Rao, the author, who was himself a great music director and harmonist, provided the music. When Baba Rao learnt music from 'Fidel' Hanumantha Rao, he became the most important man to set music to Surabhi (and even outside Surabhi) plays. An able hand in playing the harmonium, and an actor-director who knew the nuances of the scenes, he did a masterly job in giving music to various plays like *Maya Bazar* and *Kurukshetram*. Each major team has a proficient music director who looked after the musical needs of a play. Later came Vanarasa Narayana Rao, Leela Paparao, Kutumbarao, Ramana Kumar, Dasarathi Rao, Gangadhar Rao and Panduranga Rao, whose expertise in providing musical score helped the groups to a great extent.

Though violin, mridangam and the drone (*titti*) were the accompanying instruments at the beginning, they gave way to harmonium and tabla by 1904 and still later, the clarinet and small drums along with bango became added attractions. Today the harmonium is slowly being replaced by casio. Other instruments that helped create the proper atmosphere is the conch (*sankha*) and the flute. In Surabhi plays, the gong plays an important role for it is used whenever there is a telling emotional outburst or a fight to ensue.

In almost all Surabhi plays, musical rendering of poems and songs is an important element. Poems are sung with elaborate *ragas* as in the Padya Natakams since it is the most attractive feature of the Telugu traditional plays. Though the Padya Natakam writers avoided songs in later years (with a few exceptions), the Surabhi people did not. Songs still form a very important part of their musical score. In plays like *Maya Bazar*, *Srikrishna Leelalu* and more recently in *Veerabrahmendra Charitra* and *Shiridi Sai Mahatmyam*, music - both songs and poems - are very prominent.

The most important ragas they use are Mohana, Begada, Sriragam, Kalyani, Kharaharipriya and Kambhoji. In duets, it has become customary that two different ragas are set for the two

people. There is no background singing. Every Surabhi actor learns to sing from an early age of training since acting involves singing also.

Costume and Make-up

“From the age of yellow oil paint, vermilion and mica, we have come to the age of max factor and crepe hair in make-up” - this sums up the changes in make-up since the beginnings of theatre in Andhra to the present day. The same can be said of Surabhi make-up as well.

While there are master craftsmen in charge of each of the technical departments like sceneries, lighting and special effects, make-up is taken care of by every individual actor, young or old. Veterans, usually parents, keep the children in front of them while doing their own make-up and teach them as well. The green room (it is infact a central hall wherein all actors, young and old sit in two rows opposite to each other for make up) is behind the back curtain. On either side are the costume rooms where changes in costume will be done by men and women. Previously, mirrors fixed on stands were used when applying make-up. Today, the hand-held mirrors serve the purpose. Likewise, light was provided by lamps embedded in strips of wood suspended about a foot and a half above. However, electric bulbs hung at a lower height are used nowadays.

In the earliest days traditional colours were black, white, red and yellow. As puppet experts they also know the exact colour combinations. It is interesting to note that the earlier people that specialised in puppet-making (the puppets are multi-coloured) are the same that later specialized in make-up and costume. Now, every actor does his or her own make-up. The earlier puppet-making families, in a way, specialized in drawing curtains, side wings, etc.

Costumes are specially designed for each character in each of the plays. Whoever regularly takes up a role in a play is entrusted

with the job of keeping the costume safe with him or her. It is handed over to the costume man if it is decided that a particular play is not going to be repeated again during that camp.

In the earlier days when the company was poor, dresses were mainly drawn from the household sources - sarees and dhotis from the house of a village lord or from the house of the sponsor. So are the ornaments - real gold ornaments. But in course of time artificial ornaments are being used. Costumes are specially designed and made in the company itself. This was started when the Reddy land-lords took over as the chief producers of the Surabhi plays. They provided the financial assistance and Krishnaji and Subbadas supervised the preparation of the dresses in the Surabhi camp itself.

Masks are used for specialized superhuman characters like Narasimha (Man-lion incarnation). Moulds are used to show Ravana's ten heads. For Narasimhavatara in *Bhakta Prahlada*, bulbs are fitted in the place of the eyes to make the face even more terrifying, when the Lion-God's eyes glitter in pitch dark background.

Once the companies realized that stage presentation was an art and it should please the eye of the spectator, they did not hesitate to spend lavishly on costume and ornaments.

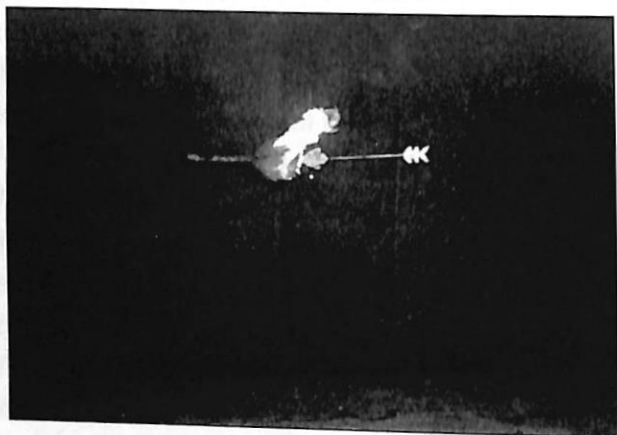
Stage Effects

In the earlier days Surabhi attracted the attention of the audience because women played women's roles at a time when even in the well-known troupes of Andhra men played female roles. The names of Uppuluri Sanjeevarao, Muppidi Jaggaraju and Sthanam Narasimha Rao stand out for their unique female impersonation. It was only in Surabhi theatre in which women who could sing, dance and act, played the roles of women when even in Parsi companies and in Gubbi and Kannayya's companies only men played female roles in the beginning days. This was Surabhi people's hereditary profession of Bommalata in which women played a prominent role augured well for them to continue the tradition.

The second important element for which Surabhi made a mark is in the use of "sepecial effects". Though in towns and cities, these "effects" are always welcome visuals that pleased the audience, in villages they are the most important attraction. These effects or "tricks" as they are called, are borrowed by Surabhi people from the Parsi theatres, via the Gubbi and other South Indian companies.

Parsi theatre productions mesmerized Indian spectators without any discrimination of language and region. Their tours in Andhra were a roaring success¹. Even before their tour of Andhra, Parsi theatres had toured Madras city several times during which time the Surabhi people had an opportunity to see them. The first Parsi theatre that toured Andhra and the Madras city was that of Balavantha Rao's 'Sangli' Theatrical Company. However the one company that influenced the entire south was that of Victoria Theatrical Company under Kurshidji Mehrvanji Balivala in 1897. All the tours to the South were an unprecedented success. The company toured Andhra every year from 1897 to 1900. The managers of Surabhi had an occasion to talk to the technicians working in the backstage after the performances, got clues from them and experimented with such tricks in their own theatre. China Ramaiah initiated the process of implementing them, with the help of Venu and Ranganayakulu, who came to Surabhi from Madras to paint curtains. Both these artists who worked in professional theatres in Bombay knew how some of the tricks are tackled. China Ramaiah did the rest.

Until the production of *Sampoorna Bharatam* in 1908, the Surabhi Company had not paid much attention to technical innovations. They used chariots on the stage, brought animals on to the stage and so on. Hitherto the audience demanded an interesting story and enjoyable music. Nothing more. But the Parsi companies that toured Andhra exercised considerable influence both on the Surabhi company as well as on the audience. As it was found novel, the company also welcomed it. Outside



Three different effects common in Surabhi Plays :
Chariot going across the stage, arms crossing and producing fire
and characters descending from above

companies could not afford such stage effects because of lack of specialists who operated them and also of costs involved though major commercial companies like the Mylavaram and Mothe companies used them sparingly. This could be seen in *Sampoorna Bharatam*, in which the lac-house of the Pandavas was put to fire and the flames were to be created. Inflammable powder was sprinkled on the torches burning nearby and the flames leapt to a height of ten feet or above. This gave the audience the illusion of a house in flames. Later, fire and flames were created from bits of cellophane sheets pasted to the rim of a fan and light was thrown on the fan as it whirled. This gave the impression of flames. Several wire-work tricks were initiated from 1908 onwards. When once the Surabhi people learnt the technique, there was no one who could compete with them.

The Surabhi technicians have mastered the art to such an extent that dozens of them, who earlier belonged to Surabhi companies now under closure, took to free-lance work as stage technicians and are doing very well.

A Surabhi production is known for such spectacular 'effects' in every play. Visual presentation of extremely powerful and nerve-breaking incidents rendered the show more enjoyable. *Srikrishna Leelalu*, *Kurukshetram*, *Dasavataramulu*, *Shiridi Sai Mahatmyam* and *Balanagamma* are some of the plays in which miracles happen almost in every scene to the enjoyment of the audience. In *Krishna Leelalu* Vasudeva crossing the flooded river carrying child Krishna to safety is an instance of wonder when the river gives way and the serpent God holds his hood to protect the young child. The prison doors unlocking by themselves is another wonder. The fire throwing hoods of the serpent-god in 'Kaliyamardana', the sight of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu in the mouth of Krishna, 'Mayala (Magician)Fakir' invoking the demon-goddesses are all very effective scenes which demanded perfect technique with perfect timing.

Similar are the fights that take place on the stage. An arrow and a lance collide with each other. Krishna's *chakra* kills Sisupala

by severing his head. The head floats in the air. In *Shiridi Sai Mahatmyam* water comes out of Sai's feet. A dead man comes alive. In *Sati Savitri* Lord Yama descends from his abode on a he-buffalow. Elephants and snakes come to kill Prahlada. All these are made possible by an intelligent use of the "wire work" with light and shade effects. Straight wires and cross wires are used for a fight of the arsenal in mid-air. Electricity would pass through the wire and the instruments are charged and spew fire. Ghatotkacha's miracles, Mayala Fakir's magical creations, etc. are very popular even today.

These effects need to be carefully implemented on time. To enable such timely implementation, signals are needed. Sound from hand-made crackers serve the purpose. These sounds would just precede the miracles and create a mesmeristic impression on the audience. The technique of light and darkness is also employed. In such cases sound effects are synchronized with lighting and with special effects. The Surabhi companies made an excellent use of these effects to make each of their plays an enjoyable fare. Perhaps, sometimes, some companies tend to over do it.

NOTES

1. Parsi Theatres' tours to South India, especially Madras (Chennai) were many. However, the Companies that toured Andhra, then a part of Madras presidency, were:

1. Poona Sangli Company (Balwanta Rao)	1893
2. Baliwala Company (every year)	1897 to 1900
3. Jamkhandi Company	1905-1906
4. Dadabhai Toonthi Company	1911-1912
5. Rippon Theatre	1912
6. Sarvia Company	1912
7. Dorabji Company	1917

2. The severing of the head of a warrior in the battle, as shown in the Shadow Puppet Theatre is a moving scene. In order to reproduce the same image, Surabhi people have invented a way by showing a fake trunk and a head thrown up in turmoil, separately.

IX

Life of the SURABHI PEOPLE - ON STAGE AND OFF STAGE

Out of the several 'Aare' families that practised puppeteering as a profession, only four took to theatre, and even among the four, only a very few individual families joined the theatre stream. These four families - Vanarasa, Aveti, Rekandar and Sindhe - who originally came from Mysore area and settled down in the Rayalaseema area of Andhra, left puppet plays and embraced theatre. There are still thousands of people belonging to these four families whose profession is puppetry.

When they were in the puppet profession, the Aare puppeteers followed the Marathi way of life. They learnt Telugu, performed shows in Telugu language, but retained their own identity by speaking the 'Aare' language at home and worshipping their Gods, Vithobha and Mahankali. They also celebrated festivals of both Andhra and Maharashtra. But, when they were weaned away from the remaining puppet families and established a theatre group, they left off the few remnants of social traditions followed until then. Since theatre is a profession that demanded greater interaction with the people, their 'Aare' accent came in the way. In fact, a conscious attempt was made by Govinda Rao to see that the Surabhi actors speak as perfect Telugu as natives. The music should not resemble that of the puppet shows, but must sound like that of theatre. That is why the elders kept their children under

the tutelage of renowned music teachers like Garikapati Kotaiah Devara. They also invited every luminary, especially poets and writers and took their opinions and corrected themselves. Likewise, they also invited noted playwrights who wrote plays for them to come and train their actors in diction. By 1901-02, the actors turned a new leaf in their diction which was now perfect, without the 'Aare' accent. Other 'Aare' families which are still in the puppeteering profession follow the old custom of speaking in their dialect at home while performing in Telugu.

Social Life

Two important aspects of the 'Aare' community's social life determine their relations with the outside world. Since their migration from Maharashtra via Karnataka, and their permanent settlement in Andhra, they have absorbed the Telugu customs and followed them as any other members of the Telugu community, thereby celebrating both Aare and Telugu rituals. But the Surabhi people slowly followed Telugu customs and started worshipping Telugu Gods. Sri Rama, Balaji (Lord Venkateswara) and Anjaneya are the family Gods they worship. It is interesting to note that the first puppet show during an year must take place in honour of Sri Rama and is usually held in or around the Rama temple. A similar devotional attitude pervades the entire community. If the Aare people outside the Surabhi fold still worship their Aare gods and celebrate Aare rituals, it is different with the Surabhi people. They have shed their ancient customs and absorbed themselves into the main stream of Telugu culture. In fact, Anjaneya was the personal God of Govinda Rao and the temple of Anjaneya at Gandi was his favourite. He gave munificent gifts to Anjaneya temples if he came across them on his tours.

Originally, Amba was the deity of the Aare clan. They were all Saivites and wore *yagnopaveeta*, the sacred thread. The chief temple of their religious worship is the Vithobha temple at Dharwad. On the other hand, within the family rituals, the sect is rather conservative. This can be seen especially in their marriages.

The migrant sect, in order to save its separate identity, married only within the community. When they migrated to Andhra only four families were involved and hence, marriages took place only within these four families.

Among the four families, the Vanarasa family has marital relations with the other three. It means that the boys and girls of Vanarasa family will be given in marriage to girls and boys of the other three families. This naturally limits the selection of brides and bridegrooms. Though they have not rejected outside alliances, they also did not encourage them. It was so because, in the early days, their antecedents were questioned and intercommunity marriages were not encouraged. As such, aged men marrying young girls was also common in the old days. When a boy suitable to a girl in age within these families could not be found, the girl was given to an older man within the sect rather than trying to marry her outside the sect. That was one of the reasons why old time Surabhi men had more than one wife.

To have more than one wife was very natural among the puppeteers. It was more often for the sake of professional convenience. If a wife was in the family way, the puppeteer could not perform puppet shows. In order to continue the show business, he was forced to have a second wife, one wife taking care of the house and the children and the second to accompany him for performances. He usually married two sisters or cousins in the nearest families so that the two would be amicable with each other.

The same seemed to be the practice among most of the first and even the second generation Surabhi people. Sanjeeva Rao had two wives. Venkoji had four wives. Govinda Rao had two wives and China Ramaiah three. If we look at the work division of the wives it would be evident that at least one wife was an expert actress and the other one was good at rearing children and taking care of the entire family. This practice, however, was discontinued with the third generation Surabhi, when Govinda Rao's children came of age.

The 'Aare' people are a well-knit clan, depending on each other, helping each other, always giving importance to solidarity among the clan members. This has been a hereditary quality among the 'Aare' people, for they must have migrated almost at a strong rural-based background with old time values and continued to be so all through. In this community, family is the nucleus, giving importance to clan relationships. As in most groups following an oral tradition (for 'Aare' has no written tradition, only an oral one) the woman is the head of the family. Although, the man may seem important in the mainstream of life, within the family he is only a figurehead. It is the woman who is more intelligent (as conceded by men confidentially), more meritorious and more tolerant than the man. Generally, Surabhi women are the family heads and they are the force behind men who are responsible for the success of the family as well as the theatre. This is amply proved by the daughters of Govinda Rao who not only were first-rate actresses, but were also successful managers, understanding wives and excellent mothers.

It is largely due to the women's broad-minded attitude that several families live together amicably. In fact, a Surabhi company consists of six or seven families very closely related. They live together, though each family has its own 'quarters' within the hall premises adjoining the stage area. But they depend on each other, share their joys and sorrows and live as though they belong to one large family. All this is made possible by their women, especially the wife of the company head.

Another important aspect of the Surabhi people is their attitude to financial matters. There is no difference as far as payments are concerned between one actor and the other, between an important actor and a backstage worker, between a man and a woman. The only difference in payment is between an adult and a child. Even a child is paid and no work is taken free. The person who played the king's role and the person who played his servant were paid equally. Besides, they all belong to very close-knit families and each one is related to the other and so, they also do not feel that

one is superior to are more important than the other. Any work in theatre is equally well respected.

In the old days, when the Surabhi theatres started, the families were not paid a monthly salary. Instead, they used to get a 'share'. It was an old custom in the puppet families that whatever one family earned out of a puppet show must be shared by all the puppet families settled in the village. Half of the paid remuneration would go to the main performers and the other half went to the other puppeteer families. That's how, even after shifting to theatre, Surabhi people retained the method of "equal sharing of earnings".

The way of sharing the income in the old days was interesting. After a camp was wound up, they first deducted all the expenses from the money earned. From the residual amount, one share was kept separate for Gods and rituals. This money was spent for gifts to temples, for honouring scholars, towards payment of school fees of poor students and other welfare activities. Another "share" was reserved for "stage". This was to buy machines, costumes, make-up materials, curtains and painting; in short, anything that goes into production. One "share" was completely spent for lighting equipment, since this was the most identifiable distinction a Surabhi company could boast of. The remaining amount was equally divided among all people - every adult getting one full share while every child is given half a share. "Equality in payment for whatever work done" was the motto of these people. In the old days the Manager was often paid one anna or half an anna extra share - by any standard, a very meagre amount. Even today artist-families are paid on the basis of the adults and children in that family in the same ratio as was paid earlier. The only difference now is this: in the old days the actors got a share on the basis of the revenues. Nowadays the actors are not concerned with the revenue and irrespective of the income, the actor-families are paid a monthly salary in the same proportion.

There was another interesting silver lining to this sense of economic equality. Gifts - either in money or in material - were

often given to individual actors. Such gifts were considered “company” property. The materials given would be of common use. This is to avoid any kind of prejudice among artists, and also to stress the fact that their theatre is a group activity and not an individual effort!

There is another social custom closely related to the revenues. In case two successive camps did not earn enough money to share, they resort to the “common kitchen.” According to this, a common kitchen will be raised with a minimum number of dishes where every member of the company will have his lunch and dinner. This is called “kanda”, which means common food. This continues until things become normal and camps do well. This reminded one of the undivided families in the old times. This ensured mutual trust and dependence on each other. Even now this practice continues in times of need.

There is yet another aspect of financial management to support the needy members. When a camp is on and performances are put on board, there is a provision for having a pan-shop, a cigarette shop, a tea shop, etc. Each shop owner pays rent. If a needy member asks for renting a shop for reasons of a daughter’s wedding or a child’s schooling he will be allotted the shop. Thus, the family can ensure some extra earnings, besides the loans that are usually provided for such ceremonies. It is also customary that all marriages are performed in the camp ‘house’ only and all the people participate in it to bless the couple. This also enables the families to spend no money for a hall and other paraphernalia.

We have eyewitness accounts of the professional attitude of Surabhi men and women, especially women. Hari Purushotham, a playwright for many Surabhi companies, reports¹ that he actually saw an actress who was about to take the role of Chintamani, a prostitute in the play of the same name, having had a tussle with her real-life husband just before the play began. The husband struck her with a brass vessel and she had a deep wound on her forehead and blood was oozing. She was already dressed. It was

time for the prayer. She quickly had some powder applied to the wound, decorated an ornament to cover the wound and went on to the stage. She left off her tensions in the wings and went into the role the very moment she went on the stage. Such stories are aplenty. If a person dies during the show time, the body is kept, the play performed as usual and then they attend to the needs. Child births in the wings is a common happening.

The women are also in-charge of the costume and ornament departments. In their spare time, they stitch costumes and mend ornaments. Wigs are made by men. Men are also in charge of painting the curtains. There are several instances of pregnant women completing the role, coming into the wings or their quarters within the tent and giving birth to a child. Children were born on the boats when they were in transit from one camp to the other or on the way when they were travelling by a bullock cart.

It is amazing to see very young children walk on to the stage, unhesitatingly, all made up, to perform a role. It is often said that a Surabhi artist is born on the stage, brought up on the stage and dies on the stage. It is their personal choice and professional necessity and they accept it happily.

Artistic Life

Each major company will have about sixty members, men and women, young and old. Everyone shares the work from pitching the tent to removing it, and doing work inside the hall and outside without any distinction. Usually, harmonists, engine workers and lighting men are Surabhi's own people. There is no specific role division among the members. All of them know the entire text. Women take female roles, but are competent to take up male roles also. There are important actresses like Papabai, Ramabai, Dhanalaxmi, Subhadramma, Santhakumari, Janakamma and others who wielded both men's and women's roles equally well. As the members of a company belong to all age groups, each one takes up the role appropriate to him or her. Every one is adept in make-up. Though character make-up is limited to the actors who

take up the major roles, all people, young and old, know straight make-up. There will be no disparities between one and the other either in the green room or during a performance. Everyone feels the responsibility of not only doing his or her work, but also of helping others. That theatre is a composite art and everyone connected with it must work in unison to make the production a success is nowhere better illustrated than in the Surabhi companies.



Nagalaxmi as
Balavardhi Raju
in *Balanagamma*

Vasundhara Devi
as Yama in
Sati Savitri

Examples of women playing men's roles

Surabhi companies adopt the *Natya Sastra* concept of selecting men and women for appropriate roles, based on their age (*vayo*), their appearance (*rupa*) and inner personality (*guna*). Women play men's roles, sometimes out of necessity, but other times to prove their worth. The same is not true about men taking up women's roles, though that was the only prevailing 'casting-method' in all the other theatres outside Surabhi. In Dharmavarm Krishnamachari's *Sarasa Vinodini Sabha*, which seemed to have set an example of a near professional theatre, only men played female roles. In a way, the greatest attraction, in the initial days of Surabhi's existence was that women played roles on the stage and showed all the *rasas* including *sringara* to the astonishment of one and all².

Though the idea of an understudy was never in existence, actors were always available to replace any character. Since all of them know the entire text by heart (not merely the dialogues of his or her role alone), replacement in times of emergency becomes easy. This, in a way, is again, a continuation of the puppet show tradition. In puppet shows, every performer knows the entire text. They know it by way of repeating the lines of the songs in the chorus every night they perform. The children learn the art by seeing their parents perform and by repeating the lines in choral refrain. The same tradition is continued here. Since there will be at least about 15 to 20 performances of each play during an year (and sometimes many more), and will have that many number of rehearsals, the performers will easily get the lines and will be thorough with the entire text.

If an occasion demands, leading actors take up small roles and vice versa. We have obvious examples: Govinda Rao, the manager of the company used to take up a negative role like that of a thief in *Kantamathi*. Aveti Nageswara Rao, a character actor and Company Manager used to do the role of a snake charmer. Peda Ramaiah was said to have played the role of Raja Raja in *Sarangadhara* and came back as the hangman at the end of the play. Such examples abound even among women. Only because they don't have such distinctions and inhibitions and because everyone can do any role in that age group, the Surabhi companies could overcome many exigencies of ill-health, accident, etc. and continue their performances without any break.

Until recent times, all major companies used to maintain a school within the camp with a teacher. Ten to twenty children studied here during the day and participated in the plays in the evening. However, as schools even in small villages are now available, such in-camp schools do not exist anymore. Even now, the whole camp resembles a 'gurukulam'. On one side there are rehearsals going on for the forthcoming play. On another side, the actors practise poems and songs with the harmonist and the

tabla player. Yet in another place, people prepare or mend wigs and on another side women stitch and prepare costumes. It is a combination of a 'gurukulam' and a workshop.

It is customary that Surabhi companies commission eminent playwrights to write plays exclusively for them. The plays are specially written to suit the company and its actors. They write the plays in consultation with the managers and the major actors. They are written keeping in view the potentialities of the actors. If a singer is to perform a particular role, he or she will be specially provided with poems and songs. The same writer may be commissioned to do the same play for another company if the first one becomes popular. In such cases the playwright writes an altogether different version of the play. Otherwise there are dangers of confrontation between the two companies.

For example, Krishna Sarma wrote two different versions of *Balanagamma*. His treatment of the character of Balarama in the two versions of *Maya Bazar* is a case in point. In one version, Balarama is a drunkard because the actor is an expert comic actor! In another version, Balarama is a very sober character and can sing well and his diction is excellent. So, to suit him, Balarama is characterized as an elder statesman.

When a playwright is approached to write a play, it is customary that he acquaints himself thoroughly with the potentialities of the acting group³. The harmonist or music director (if there is one) is a part of this preparatory group. A play is written taking into consideration the singers, the actors with good diction and the actors who can play villains' roles or comic roles. The playwright is invited to stay with the company until the play is complete. And once the play is completed, it is the responsibility of the author to train the actors in diction and speech, analyze the play for them and also guide them in movements. Sometimes, there might be a special coach for songs, but usually the harmonist is entrusted with the job. When the first show of a new play is staged, the author is honoured and his job comes to an end. From then

onwards the Manager is responsible for the show. When the play is on and if some actor does a mistake, the manager calls him the next day and corrects him. The manager becomes responsible for the successful conduct of the play once the author leaves the company. It is like the Director and the Stage Manager in the West. The director's job is complete when the maiden show is presented from where the stage manager takes over.

If the manager is responsible for the overall production, each branch is under the control of a person. Lighting, sound, curtains, special effects, stage settings, gate keeping and ticket selling - each of these areas will be controlled by one person and he or she will report to the manager. Though a person is identified as in-charge of a particular area of presentation, all others around help him/her if help is required. This is especially true of lighting and arranging the setting with curtains, wings or bits and pieces. Since a Surabhi play runs nonstop until the interval (now a days the play runs at a stretch without an interval) and each scene is followed by another almost in a fraction of a second, the backstage people must be alert all the time. During such times, even the actors help to arrange the set, to pull a particular curtain, etc.

Some companies use 'trolley stages' for 'transformation scenes'. If a scene has a heavy setting and signifies a total change of locale, the scenery is arranged on the trolley stage which is pushed onto the main stage whenever needed and people wonder how such a 'big' scene is arranged in such a short time. It is wonderful to see a play in the making, and how everything connected with the production instantly begins shaping up. By the time the final draft is ready and the play goes into rehearsals, all necessary preparations begin simultaneously. Special curtains, settings, dresses and all accessories will have been ready. And by the time the first performance takes place, all supporting ingredients are set properly. Surabhi people have an added advantage because they rehearse the play everyday on the stage with the minimum number of curtains and wings hung.

The Surabhi people are very particular about auspicious days, muhurtams and good omens. They perform the *ranga pooja*, common worship and other necessary rituals whenever they start a new play, besides doing invocatory rituals before each performance. They usually invite friends and elders in literary and theatre fields for the first show and invite their suggestions and implement them.

All major Surabhi companies are self-reliant. They do not depend on any outside agency to do their work. They will have experienced backstage workers besides actors and actresses. The carpenters, machine men, costume and ornament makers, painters of sceneries, ticket salesmen, gate keepers and workers of every nature form the Surabhi backstage group, besides lightmen, curtain pullers and set changers. As all of them are part of the larger Surabhi family - all cousins and nephews - the workers also feel that they are working for themselves and not for anyone outside their group.

This camaraderie is further seen in their publicity campaigns. The pamphlets and wall posters of Surabhi plays do not normally contain the names of any actor or actress, however big or well known he / she may be. Nor are the names of music directors and scenic designers given, because all theatre activity is necessarily a cooperative art. And no Surabhi person is fond of undue publicity, though some managers in recent times invite politicians and local leaders which is a sure way of getting newspaper publicity. However, by and large they feel that they are a part of a family enterprise, the success of which depends on everyone's willing participation.

NOTES

1. Hari Purushotham, "Surabhi Vari Sanghika Jeevanam", *Natya Kala*, July 1968, pp. 48-55.
2. Newspaper reviews, articles and eulogistic poems speak again and again of this one feature of women doing female roles which seems to be the primary reason for Surabhi's popularity, at least in its initial years.
3. Malladi Venkata Krishna Sarma, *Nataka Kala dhureena Aveti Nageswara Rao Jeevitamu*, Hyderabad : 1965.

IMPORTANT PLAYWRIGHTS AND THEIR PLAYS

From the very beginning of their theatrical activities the Surabhi elders laid great stress on the proper type of plays they wanted to present. In the beginning years during their constant tours, they requested well-known playwrights to write plays to suit their companeis or request them to change the already existing scripts to fit into their repertoire. Since almost all the plays written at the time were mythological plays with lots of poems and songs, what gave them credit was that they could obtain plays by the most well-known playwrights of all the regions in Andhra.

In the second phase, especially during Govinda Rao's time, it had become customary to request a writer to be a "resident playwright" who would write the play, train the actors and stay until the first performance. This is the time when mainstream theatre and Surabhi theatre parted ways, while mainstream theatre continued with the poetic musical play, Surabhi added scenic effects. In order to combine such special effects along with poems and songs, Surabhi theatre needed a specialist playwright who had a first hand knowledge of theatre techniques and who was also good in writing "absorbing" scenes.

In the third phase, during the times of Govinda Rao's sons and daughters, the palywright used to write a play to suit a particular Surabhi company. The play then will be rehearsed by the music director and the manager-director and at the end, the author will

come to oversee the last rehearsals and attend the opening night. As in the mainstream theatre in which the harmonist, who is called the “conductor” sets the music and is virtually the director of the play, even in Surabhi companies the harmonist gained importance, though the author had still a say in matters of interpreting a character or in setting a scene.

In the course of the five generations of Surabhi companies, they must have performed a hundred and odd plays. Sometimes the same theme was treated by different writers and made them differently or the same play written differently by the same author for different groups.

What makes a Surabhi play?

Usually, all Surabhi companies prefer mythological plays to historical and social ones. The reasons for such a selection are obvious. The epic stories with their striking incidents and divine characters always pleased the audience. There is equal importance to male and female characters. Unlike in other kinds of plays, mythological plays contain all the *rasas* including *adbhuta* which is rare in other kinds of plays. (‘Adbhuta’ is perhaps one *rasa* in showing which the Surabhi companies dominate since *adbhuta* *rasa* emanates mostly from the special effect scenes). Besides, they were familiar with such plays and performed them even during their puppet days. Above all the mainstream theatre abounds in such mythological plays. Besides, since they performed more in rural areas, mythological plays were preferred because the audience generally knew the stories. These and several other reasons prompted the Surabhi elders to choose mythological plays, though they performed historical and social plays as the times demanded. Whatever be the content of the play, a Surabhi play has some basic ingredients that would identify it as a typical Surabhi one.

First of all, the play must have an ‘ethical’ base, ultimately telling people a moral. That is why they often choose a mythological play which always portrays good against evil. They will take particular

care to see that poetic justice is, by all means, maintained. Even when plays on anti-heroes were attempted later, as in *Ravana Charyalu*, in which the story of Ravana was depicted, he was finally shown as a victim of his own pride and his tragic flaw by forcibly taking away Sita. Even in such plays, proper 'poetic justice' was attempted.

Secondly, with this broad 'spine' in view, the play's story and content should be new and contain full of surprises, twists and thrilling visuals. Even in plays that are popular in the contemporary theatrical scene, a Surabhi play with the same content will always look entirely different. It means that the scenario written for a Surabhi play is different from the other plays.

Thirdly, the actors, actresses and children in a particular team or the singing personnel in a company are kept in mind while the play is prepared. For example, if a company has young actors to play the roles of a young hero and heroine who can sing, the love scenes will increase or if the villain is strong and is known for his roles he will be given importance, but all these within the format of the "Surabhi play", which has a proper mixture of love, valour, pathos, laughter and surprise.

Comic scenes are an essential part of a Surabhi play. As type-casting is common in all commercial theatres, even in Surabhi such casting is an operative condition, more for convenience and necessity. Each Surabhi group will have a couple of comic actors who are trained in the tricks of the trade. Special scenes are written for them. In *Maya Bazar*, *Patala Bhairavi* and *Balanagamma*, they resemble those in the movies, but in plays like *Srikrishna Leelalu* or *Lava Kusa* they are original and many times creative and needed experienced actors to do justice to them. Some plays that are not popularly performed in the cities, but are favourites in villages have extensive comic scenes. *Kantamathi* and *Mahananda* are such plays that have ample scope for comedy. In village performances, comedy scenes contain verbal abuses, fights and even acrobatics, resembling the earlier comic figures like Kethigadu and Bangarakka and their fighting scenes in puppetry.

'Type characters' and 'type casting' are very much in vogue in Surabhi theatres, though everyone can play any role in cases of emergency. The author necessarily keeps the personalities of each company in view before writing a play.

Today new plays are rarely included in Surabhi repertoire because of several shortcomings. One drawback is that in order to start a new play, they have to stop performances for rehearsing the new play which the Surabhi people cannot afford. Secondly, it involves a lot of expenditure in terms of costumes, new curtains and stage sets. Thirdly they must find a playwright who knows the actors well and must be able to write a play suitable both to the city and village spectators. Each Surabhi play will have 20 to 25 "episodes". The locales change from the interior to the exterior within seconds. Large group scenes are alternated by single actor or two-actor scenes. Sudden appearances and disappearances are on the cards after every two scenes. One or two dance sequences are a must. Special cinema-type dances before kings, especially demon kings is a custom. Group appearances for a celebration with tiny tots along with old men and women is a must. A royal ceremony with resplendent songs and glittering costumes is also a must. Wherever it is possible, young boys find roles of the "heroes in their younger days". In *Prahlada*, *Kanakatara*, *Lava Kusa* and *Krishna Leelalu* the child characters have prominence. There will be actors to show several stages of Krishna growing, which can be shown only in a Surabhi play since they have children of all ages and all sizes! Similarly awe-inspiring scenes are a part of a Surabhi script. There are certain plays – for example, *Maya Bazar*, *Balanagamma*, *Shirdi Sai Mahatmyam*, and *Veerabrahmami Charitra* - full of exciting transformation scenes and miracle scenes.

For example, child Krishna being carried to Brindavan when Adishesha gives him shade with his hoods (*Srikrishna Leelalu*), Sasirekha on bed being carried into the skies (*Maya Bazar*), the princes becoming stones (*Balanagamma*) and many such form

an essential part of a Surabhi play. In each play such stunning visuals are a must which carry with them an aura of other-worldly fantasy, which is a great attractive feature!

Plays performed by the Surabhi Companies

Plays from Mahabharata dominate the repertoire of all the Surabhi companies. It is interesting to note that the first play performed by the Surabhi company was *Keechaka Vadha*, a piece from the Virata Paravam of the Mahabharata popular in the puppet performances. Similarly, plays that have a vast panorama are usually chosen for their visual appeal and for their artistic excellence. One of the major reasons for such a preference was the response of the audience also, since such scenes cannot be shown by other groups. The spectators, especially from the rural areas, respond usually to better visual scenes than fine literary pieces; they prefer *raga*-oriented singing than to *bhava*-oriented *abhinaya*.

A list of the plays presented over generations are given below along with the authors and the actor-managers for whom the plays were written. The list is not complete, since plays written for companies which were short-lived, are not recorded.

First Generation Plays

1. <i>Keechaka Vadha</i>	an improvised script from a puppet play	for the combined group
2. <i>Sarangadhara</i>	Raptati Subbadas	Sri Sarada Manovindini Sabha
3. <i>Sakuntala</i>	" "	" "
*4. <i>Satya Harischandra</i>	" "	" "
5. <i>Stree Sahasam</i>	Krishnaji's improvised script.	" "
**6. <i>Jaganmohana</i>	" "	" "
7. <i>Rukamangada</i>	in the beginning improvised; later adopted Bethapudi Bhagavantha Rao's script.	" "

8. <i>Subhadra Parinayam</i>	improvised	"	"
9. <i>Sri Ramanjaneyam</i> (<i>Lankadahanam</i>)	Pisupati Chidambara Sastry	"	"
10. <i>Parijathapaharanam</i>	Marepalli Ramachandra Sastry (adopted for the company)	"	"
11. <i>Bilhaneeyam</i>	" "	"	"
*12. <i>Kantamati</i>	Improvised text based on the Gubbi company's play by Tadakaluri Kuppuswamy	"	"
13. <i>Bhallana Charitra</i>	" "	"	"
14. <i>Myravana</i>	Imrpovised text from a puppet play by Tadakaluri Kuppuswamy	"	"
*15. <i>Chandrakantha</i>	Vajjhala Chintamani Sastry	"	"
*16. <i>Mahakavi Kalidas</i>	Toomu Narasimha Das	"	"
17. <i>Seetha Kalyanam</i>	Chilakamarti Laxmi Narasimham	"	"
18. <i>Narakasura Vadha</i>	" "	"	"
19. <i>Gayopakhyanam</i>	" "	"	"
20. <i>Sati Anasuya</i>	Viswanadha Kaviraju	"	"
*21. <i>Krishna Leelalu</i>	Panditha K. Subrahmanya Sastry		for all companies
*22. <i>Lava Kusa</i>	" "	"	"
*23. <i>Chintamani</i>	Kallakuri Narayana Rao	"	"
24. <i>Lanka Dahanam</i>	Panditha K. Subrahmanya Sastry	"	"

25. *Shiva Leelalu* Chakravadhanula " "
Manikya Sarma

(In the first and second generation, plays written for either Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha or for Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali were used by all the companies until and unless the companies felt that they would like to have their own version of a particular play).

Second Generation Plays

26. *Dasavataramulu* Bulusu Seetharama for Govindaraya
Sastry Surabhi Natya Mandali
27. *Chitranaleeyam* Dharmavaram
Ramakrishnamacharyulu " "
- *28. *Kanthamati* Sriramula " "
Satchidananda
Sastry
29. *Surpanakha* " " " "
Garva Bhangam
30. *Jaganmohana* Malladi " "
Atchyutarama Sastry
31. *Sampoorna* Panditha Bellary " "
Mahabharatam K Subramanya Sastry
32. *Kumara Vijayam* Chakravadhanula " "
Manikya Sarma
33. *Ravana Charyalu* " " " "
- *34. *Sati Savitri* Viswanatha Kaviraju " "
- *35. *Satya Harischandra* " " " "
36. *Mahananda* " " " "
37. *Kalidas* " " " "
38. *Stree Samrajyam* Kopparapu Subba Rao " "

39.	Bhakta Kabir	Chakravadhanula Manikya Sarma	for China Ramaiah's Sarada Manovinodini Natya Mandali
40.	Sri Krishnavataram	Viswanatha Kaviraju	" "
41.	Vasanthasena	" "	" "
42.	Paduka Pattabhishekam	Pandita K. Subramanya Sastry	for Chinna Ramaiah
43.	Bhagavatham	Viswanadha Kaviraju	" "
44.	Kusalavabhyu- dayam	" "	" "
45.	Kanakatara	Chandala Kesava Dasu	for all companies
46.	Jayantha Jayapala	(?)	
47.	Subhadra Parinayam	(?)	
48.	Zamindar	Viswanatha Kaviraju	for Aveti Venkataswamy
49.	Sampoorna Ramayanam	Hari Purushotham	" "
50.	Samporna Bharatam	" "	" "
51.	Bobbili Yuddham	Sripada Krishna Murthy Sastry	" "
*52.	Balanagamma	Hari Purushotham	Aveti Venkata Swamy
53.	Palanur Yuddham	" "	" "
54.	First Class B.A.	" "	" "
55.	Kanthamati	" "	Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali

56. ***Prameelarjuneeyam*** Viswanatha Kaviraju Govindaraya Surabhi
Natya Mandali
57. ***Gangavataranam*** Somaraju Ramanujarao Sri Venkateswara
Natya Mandali
58. ****Patalabhairavi*** Hari Purushotham " "

Third Generation Plays

59. ***Abhagini*** Malladi Venkata Poornanda Dramatic
Krishna Sarma Theatres
60. ***Kalapahad*** " " " "
61. ***Pratijna*** " " Poornanada Dramatic
Theatres
62. ***Alexander*** " " " "
63. ***Balanagamma*** " " " "
64. ***Dakshayagnam*** " " " "
- *65. ***Mayala Marathi*** " " " "
66. ***Sri Krishna*** Malladi Venkata
Devarayalu Krishna Sarma
67. ***Balidanam*** " " " "
68. ***Prematarangalu*** " " Sri Sarada Natya
Mandali
69. ***Krishnaveni*** " " for Poornanada
Dramatic Theatre
70. ***Stree*** " " " "
71. ***C.I.D.*** " " " "
72. ***Bhakta Ramadasu*** D. Gopalacharyulu " "
73. ***Daksha Yagnam*** Hari Purushotham Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya
Mandali
74. ***Devadas*** " " for Sarada Vijaya Natya
Mandali

75. <i>Bhookailas</i>	” ”	” ”
*76. <i>Maya Bazar</i>	” ”	” ”
77. <i>Kurukshetram</i>	” ”	” ”
*78. <i>Lava Kusa</i>	” ”	All Groups
*79. <i>Patala Bhairavi</i>	Malladi Venkata Krishna Sarma	Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali
*80. <i>Guna Sundari</i> <i>Katha</i>	” ”	” ”

Fourth Generation plays

81. <i>Balanagamma</i>	Vemana Sarveswara Rao	for Gajapati Natya Mandali
82. <i>Maya Bazar</i>	S.A.L. Paparao	for his own company
83. <i>Keelugurram</i>	Improvised	Sri Vijaya Natya Mandali

Fifth Generation plays

84. <i>Bhishma</i>	D.L. Roy; translated by Andra Samba Murthy	Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali
85. <i>Chandipriya</i>	Andra Samba Murthy & N. Jagga Rao	” ”
86. <i>Basthi Devatha</i> <i>Yadamma</i>	translated from Brecht by Uday Bhanu	” ”
87. <i>Sri Shiridi Sai</i> <i>Mahatmyam</i>	Burra Subrahmanyam Sastri	Sri Vinayaka Natya Mandali
88. <i>Sri Venkateswara</i> <i>Mahatmyam</i>	Andra Sambhamurthy	Sri Vinayaka Natya Mandali
89. <i>Sammakka -</i> <i>Sarakka Mahatmyam</i>	”	” ”

* These plays have several texts written separately by different writers or by the same writer.

** It can be noticed that the groups tentatively improvised a script on the basis of either a folk play which was familiar to them

or a play from Kannada, Parsi or Tamil they had seen recently and in course of time requested a chosen playwright to write the play for them.

(There may be many other plays written for minor companies which have not been included here for want of specific information)

Important Playwrights

Surabhi groups have performed several plays, running into thousands of performances. Many of these plays were written at the behest of the leaders or managers of the companies. In the beginning days, however, they had requested playwrights to permit them to use their plays and got not only the playwrights' permission, but also suitable amendments and changes to suit their team.

If one looks at the varied plays written over four generations, it will be obvious that they reflect, first of all, the changing tastes of the Telugu spectators from time to time. They also reflect the changing styles of Surabhi performances. The early plays taken up by Surabhi were plays that came to them either by chance or by the selection of their director Subbdas. But later, they preferred the folkloristic stories or stories based on local legends for quite sometime because they were groomed on their successful reputation and reception in their recently abandoned profession of puppetry.

When the theatre group found their feet on solid ground, they saw to it that plays by well-established and already popular playwrights were chosen so that they would not lag behind the mainstream theatre groups and that would also give them a recognition and approval by the public as well as theatre connoisseurs.

It was at a later stage and when their teams got consolidated, that they invited writers to their companies to be "resident-playwrights". The groups also wanted that the plays should be written in such a way that the acting potential of the team was to be taken into consideration. This gave dividends and "dependable"

plays came out. They were also particular that the plays reflected not only their acting talents, but also their technical virtuosity. Thus, later plays written for different companies, are “typical Surabhi” plays, for they have ample scope for acting as well as for showing the Surabhi “effects”.

Further, the chronological data also indicates how the Surabhi people responded to the changing trends in the society and in the field of dramatic literature. Starting with mythological plays and plays on folklore and local legends, they later chose plays based on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. These plays gave the groups ample scope for showing their acting talent and also lent them an opportunity to show multiple “effects” for which Surabhi has become famous of late. However, they also welcomed the idea of historical plays written for them exclusively or such plays taken from well known writers and trimmed them to suit their “style” of performance. Still later, they requested their resident writers to write “social” plays for them. Kopparapu Subba Rao was the first one to provide Govinda Rao with such a script (*Stree Samrajyam*). They did not, however, opt for complete prose plays. Their social plays also have poems and songs though not in such abundant numbers as in their mythological plays.

In this connection, the contribution made by some of the major playwrights whose plays enriched the repertoire of Surabhi companies is to be remembered in the same way as the contribution of the great Surabhi actors and actresses.

1. Raptati Subbadas(1869 - 1964)

Satya Harichandra, Sarangadhara, and Sakuntala

Subbadas was the writer-director who gave Surabhi a name and an identity and provided the novices the necessary theatrical training. A young man of twenty when he was requested to come and shape the destinies of the future ‘hit’ company, Subbadas took it as a challenge and proved himself successful.

Subbadas, when requested to come and stay at Surabhi, was not very keen as he was by then a prominent Harikatha exponent and also achieved name as an actor in his home town,



Raptati Subbadas
in his later years

Dharmavaram, Ananthapur district. He was cajoled to accept the offer. He was with the Surabhi group for 4 years during which time he not only gave the families training in diction and song, but also gave a name to the newly-generated company as “Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha”.

Subbadas wrote three plays while at Surabhi and trained the actors suitably, besides taking the major roles in them. He also took them to see other plays while touring, especially those that were performed by the two well-known Bellary companies - Sarasa Vinodini Sabha of Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu and Sumanorama Sabha of Kolachalam Srinivasa Rao. This was immensely helpful to the actors.

Satya Harischandra is a famous mythological play and has always been popular with the audiences. *Sarangadhara* is a local legend woven around the famous ruler of Andhra, Raja Raja Narendra and his supposedly ill-fated son, Sarangadhara. This is a fictitious story and the king, Raja Raja', had no son called Sarangadhara. However, several folk songs and ballads were in vogue and with the '*Jangam Katha*' balladeers this was the most popular narrative. The legend narrates the story of how Sarangadhara's step-mother, Chitrangi, loves her step son and attempts to seduce him. When the son rejects her amorous

advances, she reports to the king against him. The king orders his limbs to be cut as a punishment. But when he comes to know of his second wife's treachery, he becomes furious and depressed. However, the play ends happily when a *Siddha*, a divine mendicant, saves Sarangadhara and restores him to normalcy.

Subbadas played the role of Raja Raja Narendra and Peda Ramaiah did Sarangadhara's role, while Papabai was Chitrangi.

Subbdas' third play, *Sakuntala*, is a translation of Kalidasa's *Sakuntalam*. The translation, done by Subbadas himself, is said to be fairly close to the original. None of the plays written by Subbadas is available now.

2. Marepalli Ramachandra Sastry(1874-1951)

Parijathapaharanam and Bilhaneeyam



Ramachandra Sastry, popularly called 'Kavi garu' is a reputed playwright and also a well-known nationalist leader. He was regarded highly by contemporary writers, who were greatly impressed by his sharp mind and simple living. He wrote 12 plays and produced them himself for his famous organization, "Kalabhilashaka Samajam".

The members of the Sarada Manovinodini Sabha, during their maiden tour to the northern circars, saw the plays and were so

greatly impressed by them that they requested him to allow them to perform these plays and suggested a few changes to suit their team. Kavi garu obliged them and made changes in the two plays *Parijatapaharanam*¹ and *Bilhaneeyam*, as he himself wrote in the introductions to these two plays, published a year later.

Parijatapaharanam is the first play based on Srikrishna's life that Surabhi people have taken up and is concerned with the famous story of Srikrishna's fight with Indra to bring the 'Parijata' tree as requested by Satyabhama, his beloved wife. The story has been popular both with the poets, the playwrights and, of course, with the audience also.

Bilhaneeyam is a play based on the love story of the poet, Bilhana.

Parijatapaharanam stayed with the group for a long time, though *Bilhaneeyam* was wound up after the first tour. It is said that they got the amended plays when they visited Visakhapatnam and rehearsed the plays in their camps at Vizianagaram and Barampuram. On their way back they stopped again at Visakhapatnam and performed the two plays in the presence of the author, Kavi garu, who was immensely pleased with the productions and honoured the group.

3. Tadaluri Kuppu Swamy (1864-1937)

Kantamthi, Bhallana Charitra and Myravana

Tadaluri Kuppu Swamy attained fame as the harmonist and music director of Kalabhilashaka Nataka Samajam of which Marepalli Ramachandra Kavi was the founder-director. As a veteran of Hindustani music, Kuppuswamy was known for providing Parsi tunes to the songs in the plays of Marepalli. He also wrote songs for many contemporary plays.

Kantamathi and *Bhallana Charitra* are both popular plays in Kannada, performed by the Gubbi Veeranna company. The Surabhi elders wanted Kuppuswamy to write songs for the scripts they improvised.

Kantamathi, a popular legend in South India had a bearing on 'Sadarama', a successful play written in Kannada. It was one of Gubbi company's hits. The play was popular with the rural audiences because of the love episodes of the hero and the heroine and the role of a comic villain, a thief (which was for long a pet role both for Govinda Rao and China Ramaiah). The improvised play fell short of a well-knit play like Surabhi's other plays with a loose construction of the plot, having no eye on characterization. However, the play rewritten by resident playwrights several times is still performed to packed houses in villages, but rarely performed in cities.

Myravana, an episode popular in puppet tradition, has been improvised as a play by Krishnaji with some new songs now introduced by Tadakaluri Kuppaswamy. *Myravana*, though not a part of the Ramayana, is a local version that traces the victory of Rama over Ravana's friend and king of the underworld, Myravana. *Bhallana Charitra*, again, is a folk story and was an adaptation of the Kannada play, *Bhallana Charitre*.

Among the three plays, *Myravana* and *Ballana Charitre* were soon discarded by Surabhi companies and in 1906 *Kantamathi* was commissioned to be specially written by Sriramula Sachidananda Sastry. The play is still one of the most popular Surabhi plays in villages. It is also called "Gaja Donga" because of the importance given to a thief in the play, and because he is virtually made the hero of the play.

4. Malladi Achyutarama Sastry (1872-1943)

Jaganmohana, Sri Krishna Leelalu

One of the most popular 'company' writers of the first quarter of the 20th century who first worked in the Jaganmohini theatre at Machilipatnam and later was the writer for Mylavaram Bala Bharati Nataka Samajam for which he wrote several popular plays, Malladi had a facile pen. Among his most popular plays are *Draupadi Vastrapaharanam*, *Sri Krishna Leelalu* and *Bhakta Kuchela*.

The author was especially invited to write *Jaganmohana* for the Surabhi company. There was also a Kannada play with the same theme made popular by the Gubbi company. Following the Kannada play, Sastry wrote a well-knit play in which truth ultimately won. Veerasena's truthfulness until the end of the play and the true love between Mandavi and Mohana, Jaganmohana losing his life due to the vile manipulations of Ghatodari - each of these episodes was woven with care and dramatic effect. The play, like a later day *Balanagamma*, was a great success in the rural areas especially for its thrilling scenes of intrigue and comedy.

Sri Krishna Leelalu is still one of the most popular plays of the Surabhi repertoire depicting Sri Krishna's early encounters with the demons. Some later-day Surabhi companies, however, took up Pandita K. Subrahmanya Sastry's version of the play as it was made popular by other commercial companies.

5. Chilakamarthi Laxmainarasimham (1861-1946)

Seetha Kalyanam, Narakasura Vadha (Prasanna Yadavam) and Gayopakhyanam

A versatile playwright and novelist, Chilakamarthi is credited with the writing of the most popular mythological play *Gayopakhyanam*. Chilakamarthi gave his early plays to Vanarasa Govinda Rao during their visit to Rajahmundry in 1906.

Seetha Kalyanam and Narakasura Vadha were originally written for his own association, Hindu Nataka Samajam and Chilakamarthi allowed other samajams also to perform them, as was the practice until the commercial companies came into existence on a large scale.

Seetha Kalyanam, as the name suggests, is a play on the life of Sri Rama from his birth to his wedding and contains several interesting episodes that would befit a Surabhi performance.

On the other hand, *Narakasura Vadha* (originally called *Prasanna Yadavam*, but Chilakamarthi allowed the Surabhi

people to use the more popular and recognizable name, “Narakasura Vadha”) is about Sri Krishna killing the demon king Narakasura, in killing whom Satybhama played a leading role. It was said that two famous actors of the Hindu Nataka Samajam, Immaneni Hanumantha Rao Naidu and Tanguturi Prakasam, who was later to become the first Chief Minister of Andhra, acquitted themselves well in the roles of Narakasura and Satyabhama. In the Surabhi company Peda Ramaiah, China Ramaiah and Papabai took the leading roles.

Though *Seeta Kalyanam* was soon replaced by another Rama story, *Lavakusa*, by the Surabhi people, *Narakasura Vadha* continued in their repertoire for a long time. *Gayopakhyanam*, a story in which Krishna and Arjuna encounter each other for a battle, was a hit in the mainstream musical theatre.

6. Pandita K. Subrahmanya Sastry (1881-1934)

Sampoorna Mahabharatam, Lava Kusa,

Sri Krishna Leelalu and Draupadi Vastrpaharanam

A well-known playwright whose works are associated with Sarasa Vinodini Sabha of Bellary, Sastry was a scholar in Sanskrit and Telugu and worked in Bellary as a Telugu Pandit. His plays *Krishna Leelalu* and *Lava Kusa* had been performed by several professional groups during 1910-1935.

The Surabhi group first took up his *Sampoorna Mahabharatam*. Even after Govinda Rao started his own association, Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali in 1927, both the Surabhi teams used to perform the play. The play gave ample scope for the Surabhi people to show their versatility in acting since there are several important acting roles in the play.

Sastry's play *Draupadi Vastrpaharanam* was a hit with almost all the Samajams in Andhra. With the Mylavaram and other companies the play had spiralled several important actors into fame. Two associations of Surabhi earned fame in producing the play - Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali in which T.Koteswara

Rao played the role of Duryodhana and Sarada Manovinodini Natya Mandali in which China Ramaiah played the role with great success. *Kurukshetram* replaced this play later.

7. Chakravadhanula Manikya Sarma

Kumara Vijayamu, Ravana charyalu

Manikya Sarma wrote about thirty plays, many of them in the style of the musical drama of the early 20th c. This is indicated in the titles of many of his plays, which bear the prefix “Sangeeta” before his plays.

The two plays written for Govinda Rao were also used by China Ramaiah’s Sarada Manovinodini Natya Mandali.

“Ravana Charyalu” (The Deeds of Ravana) was the story of Ravana. The play presented the tragic side of his character whose fall occurred due to a curse from a sage. It showed two-fold weaknesses of Ravana - viz: his egocentric personality and his weakness for the beautiful on the earth. The character of Ravana was drawn with loving care, and all other characters almost looked like puppets. This play is in fact the first one in which character study of a mythological figure dominated.

One of the best plays in the early phase of both Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha and the Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali, *Kumara Vijayamu* is a dramatization of Kumara Samabhavam, an important story from “*Siva Puranam*”, depicting the story of Subrahmanya’s birth and his victory over Tarakasura.

The story was divided into five units, each unit shown as an act, enabling smaller groups to use any one of the acts for a short performance. The 5 acts of the play are: 1. Daksha Yagnam, 2. Veerabhadra Vijayam, 3. Narada Garvabhangam, 4. Kama Dahanam, 5. Kumara Vijayam. The play ends with Shanmukha’s wedding with Devasena. Although episodic in construction, the

thematic thread that suggests the killing of Tarakasura binds the story into a unified play.

The play had great acting potentials. When the play was performed by Govindaraya Suarabhi Nataka Mandali, it received universal acclaim as one of the best Surabhi productions.

In later years, Manikya Sarma wrote *Bhakta Kabir* for China Ramaiah's Sarada Manovinodini Natya Mandali which also ran for several successful seasons.

8. Viswanatha Kaviraju (Malladi Viswanatha Sarma : 1893-1947)

Sati Savithri, Satya Harischandra, Mahananda, Sri Krishnavataram, Lava Kusa, Vasanthasena, Zamindar, Bhagavatam, Kusalavabhudayam, Prameelarjuneeyam, Kalidas



A scholar in Sanskrit and Telugu, Viswanatha Sarma is a memorable name in the history of Telugu theatre between 1920 and 1940. His translation of Sanskrit plays like Saktibhadra's *Ascharya Chudamani* on one side and his humorous one actors like *Dongatakam* on ther other, put him on a high pedestal of theatrical achievement. Besides writing successful plays, he is also known as a visionary who always dreamed of the well-being of the

Telugu theatre. He is singularly responsible for consolidating all the theatre people on to one platform through Andhra Nataka Parishad in 1923 at Polaki, his native village in Srikakulam district. When he was approached by Vanarasa Gaovinda Rao to write plays for his company, Kaviraju came into contact with him. He met the members of the Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali at Tenali, when it was camping there. It was here that he envisioned the need for a theatre consortium and shared it with Vanarasa Govinda Rao and his secretary Kothapally Laxmaiah. It was under Kaviraju's over-all supervision and the financial assistance of Govinda Rao that Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad was started to promote theatre activity in 1929. He was the Chairman of the Reception Committee that successfully conducted the first Parishad.

Kaviraju wrote about twenty plays for Surabhi people - first for Govinda Rao, then for China Ramaiah and for many other important companies of the Surabhi people.

Among the seven plays he wrote exclusively for Govinda Rao, *Sati Savitri*, *Satya Harischandra* and *Mahananda* are the most well-known. The stories of the first two plays were not new either to Surabhi audience or to other audiences. *Sati Savitri*, written by Sriramula Sachidananda sastry, was a famous play performed by another professional theatre, Mylavaram Company. In contrast with it, Kaviraju's play offered a new dimension. Unlike Guraza Naidu who raved and ranted across the stage with loud prowls in the character of Yama, Tanguturi Koteswara Rao, a versatile actor but an outsider who played in the Surabhi company, acted with great restraint and understanding. *Savitri* and *Satyavanta* were played by the two sisters Narasamma and Subhadramma. The play exploited a woman's struggle against fate and was received extremely well.

So is the case with Kaviraju's *Satya Harischandra*. This is the third *Harischandra* that Govinda Rao alone produced - Subbadas', Balijepalli's and now this play. Various tricks of Varanasi and the

burial ground were introduced to make it attractive. The play had a judicious mixture of songs, poems, rhetorical prose and native metres like *dandakam*. The play is still very popular with all the Surabhi groups.

Mahananda, of course, was an entirely different play. It was a farce in true Kaviraju style and very much unlike any of Surabhi plays. The play is about a king Madanakama Raju who is a fool, who punishes those that did him good and rewards his adversaries. He has a friend in Bhairava Sastry, with whose help he wants to cleanse public life. Govinda Rao's son, Subba Rao and his secretary, Kothapally Laxmaiah played the two 'Sakara' type characters memorably.

The next set of three plays- *Sri Krishnavataram*, *Lava Kusa* and *Vasantasena* were written by Kaviraju for China Ramaiah's Sarada Manovinodini Natya Mandali. Kaviraju also wrote a social play, *Zamindar*, for Aveti Venkataswamy. His son Aveti Nageswara Rao had the play in his repertoire all through.

9. Kopparapu Subba Rao (1896-1957)

Stree Samrajyam

A veteran theatre personality – a writer, critic, producer and director and music director – Rao was also a great harmonist. He accompanied Govinda Rao's company when it toured the Telangana districts in the year 1927. He then wrote the play *Stree Samrajyam*, the first social play the Surabhi people have taken up, though Kaviraju's *Mahananda* is almost nearer to a social play. The play is about the advantages and disadvantages of women's freedom. Laxmamma, wife of Govinda Rao, played the leading role.

10. Malladi Venkata Krishna Sarma

Mayabazar, *Dakshayagnam*, *Mayala Marathi*, *Balanagamma*, *Abhagini*, *Alexander*, *Pratigna*, *Sri Krishnadevarayalu*, *Balidanam*, etc.



Venkatakrishnan Sarma was the most prolific among the writers who wrote for the Surabhi companies. Younger brother of Viswanatha Kaviraju, Krishna Sarma also wrote some comic one act plays before embarking upon writing mythological and folkloristic plays. A man who knew the requirements of the several Surabhi companies individually, he sometimes wrote three different versions of the same theme.

Sarma also wrote social and historical plays for Aveti Nageswara Rao's New Poorananda. He was also adept in including humorous episodes in Surabhi plays written by others which were always popular.

11. Hari Purushotham (1909-1974)

Sampoorna Ramayanam, Sampoorna Bharatam, Bobbili Yuddham, Balanagamma, Palnati Yuddham, First class B.A., Kantamathi, Dakshayagnam, etc.

Hari Purushotham is another prolific writer who wrote for many Surabhi companies in the latter years of Surabhi. He wrote plays for Aveti Venkataswamy's company and later wrote for S.A. Baba Rao's Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali. A writer who has a felicitous pen, he wrote and restructured popular plays for all the groups, especially for Aveti Venkataswamy, S.A. Baba Rao and others.²



The above writers shaped the destinies of all the Surabhi companies and were responsible for the rise of several of them. They always lived like members of the families for which they were writing and enjoyed their hospitality. The Surabhi managers also looked after the writers most magnanimously and went on helping them in times of need even though they ceased to write for them. This mutual trust and respect benefited both the parties involved.

NOTES

1. Marepalli Ramachandra Sastry, *Parijatapaharanamu*, (1899), "Peethika", p. ii.
2. Tripuraneni Subba Rao, *Prakhyata Nataka Karta, Ashtavadhani Hari Purusottam Jeevitha Chitrana*. Hyderabad : Kaviraja Sahiti Sadanam, 1967.

IMPORTANT ACTORS, MANAGERS and TECHNICIANS

Surabhi always accorded great importance to group activity and never ever highlighted individual actors or their acting talents. However, some actors stand out prominently for their versatility. The list here consists of only Surabhi-born actors, though others like T. Koteswara Rao of Chirala in the Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali or Andhe Mallikarjuna Rao of Sri Vijaya Natya Mandali or Parepalli Subba Rao, who acted in several Surabhi companies from time to time were regarded highly both by fellow actors and spectators. It was also common that several established contemporary actors came into Surabhi during their 'lean' period.

1. Vanarasa Peda Ramaiah



Son of Sanjeeva Rao and Channamma, Peda Ramaiah was the sixth son in the family. He is the most meritorious of the first generation Surabhi actors. The man took to theatre as naturally as a duck takes to water. Adept in *laya* since early days, he could easily shift allegiance from puppet shows to drama, and mastered the song sequences in the plays. His speciality in doing serious roles is only countered by his portrayal of comic roles and he learnt rudiments of acting from Rapati Subbadas and played the roles of

Harischandra, Dushyanta and Sarangadhara with commendable success.

Ramaiah was very keen on building this young organization. With his amicable temperament, he entreated many a playwright - including Marepally Ramachandra Sastry and Vajjhala Seetharama Sastry - to write plays for Surabhi theatre.

If Govinda Rao was responsible for initiating and nurturing the concept of a professional family theatre and was the architect, when Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha was launched, Peda Ramaiah was its principal promoter and the first proprietor. Until his death in 1914, he was the unacknowledged leader of the group, only next to Govinda Rao. His elder brothers, Venkaiah and Krishnaiah too followed his instructions. Govinda Rao always gave credit to his elders and left to them the day-to-day administration. He naturally preferred his youngest uncle Peda Ramaiah, for he was nearer his own age group and understood the problems easily.

Peda Ramaiah and his company toured northern Andhra twice. They also visited Rangoon and Mandalay in 1912-13 when Papabai and China Ramaiah accompanied him. The numerous medals, citations and addresses bestowed on him are all proofs of his versatility as an actor, singer and manager. Peda Ramaiah was an actor of great caliber. His portrayal of the character of Bhima was hailed by one and all. In later years he always donned the major roles. His roles of Raja Raja Narendra in *Sarangadhara*, of Harischandra and of Dushyanta were considered better executed than even Raptati Subbadas' portrayal of them¹.

In 1914, he suffered an attack while the Company was visiting Secunderabad and he died there. Recently, Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham renovated Peda Ramaiah's *Samadhi* - at Mettuguda in Secunderabad.

2. Vanarasa Govinda Rao

Chief architect of Surabhi theatres, Govinda Rao was known for his administrative acumen. So much so, his managerial



capabilities almost marginalized his virtuosity as an actor. He was mainly responsible for the birth of Surabhi, its consolidation and all-round growth. He transformed a wayward, nomadic puppet group into a self-reliant theatre group, which won the respect of theatre lovers all over the state.

Born in 1868 and adopted by Venkaiah in 1877, Pakeeranna alias Govinda Rao was found by Venkaiah and his wife as an orphan suffering from chicken pox neglected by everyone. Having lost his parents and brothers in an epidemic, Pakeeranna was absorbed into the Vanarasa family. The entire family treated him with love and affection. And soon he learnt the arts of singing, puppet manipulation, and playing mridangam from his foster parents and uncles. But he felt completely dejected by the treatment meted out to puppeteers by villagers. Frustrated, he shunned the job and ran away. When his parents entreated him to come back, he came back solely on the condition that the family would henceforth participate only in stage plays. After running away, he went to Nandyal and joined Jyothi Subbaiah Company, where he initially worked as an errand boy and later as an actor. As the story goes, he played 'Viswamitra' in *Harischandra* very creditably.

Govinda Rao was not only instrumental in staging *Keechaka Vadha* successfully - the first Surabhi play at the behest of Chenna Reddy and Rami Reddy of Surabhi, he also acted as Nakula in the play. Govinda Rao actively participated and played the roles of Veerabahu (and later Harischandra) in *Harischandra*, Sarangrava in *Sakuntala* and Raja Raja Narendra in *Sarangadhara*. He was however remembered for the role of



As thief in
Kanthamati

Anjaneya in *Sri Ramanjaneyam*, also called *Lanka Dahanam* written by Pisupati Chindabara Sastry. He was justly famous for his role as the thief in *Kantamathi* and as Anjaneya in *Lanka Dahanam*. He also showed his acting abilities in doing the role of a basket-maker (*Medara*) in *Jayantha Jayapal*². In fact, his body was burnt to a great extent while he was enacting the role of Anjaneya. Since then, he acted only the thief's role in *Kantamathi* and mainly looked after the affairs of the company.

Undoubtedly, Govinda Rao was a leader with a vision. He assiduously worked for the recognition of the Surabhi group as a top theatre association. He devised plans for its over-all expansion. And, more than anything else, he took the Surabhi elders and youngsters along with him in the long and strenuous journey, undertaken by the families. And all of them followed him as devotees follow a saint. He trained all his sons and daughters, sons-in-law and daughters-in-law in theatre techniques including acting. He encouraged each one of them to start a company and helped them in establishing it. Govinda Rao was an all-rounder, though he spent all his abilities in energizing and enthusing Surabhi people to organize themselves into a vital force in Telugu theatre.

Govinda Rao's contribution to the Telugu theatre is no less important. It was he who spearheaded a movement of consolidation of several diverse practitioners in Telugu theatre – actors, playwrights, scholars and critics – and brought them on to one platform under the banner of the Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad in 1929 and all through his active life helped the organization. He was also honoured by a grateful Telugu theatre fraternity which bestowed on him the title, "Andhra Nataka Kalodharaka."

Govinda Rao died on December 19, 1953 at his native village, Polasanipalli. His death anniversary is celebrated as the "Founder's Day" every year by the Surabhi families and all those that are nearer to the Surabhi tradition.

3. Surabhi Aveti Papabai

Daughter of Subbaiah, Sanjeeva Rao's second son, Papabai was adopted by Peda Ramaiah and she virtually spent all her life with him and with the first Surabhi theatre company Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha. Her acting abilities were praised by one and all. Even at the age of 8, she was considered a gifted singer.



Papabai is the first known actress on the modern Telugu stage. Considered attractive and beautiful, cast in any role, she was easily the centre of attraction. She enacted the role of Sairandhri (Draupadi in disguise) in *Keechaka Vadha* – the very first Surabhi play. She acquitted herself well behind the stage in the puppet shows as well as on the stage. Later on, she enacted all major female roles such as Sakuntala, Chandramati and Chitrangi in the early plays of Surabhi. An ace singer and a charming beauty with attractive personality, she stole the honours in whatever role she did. Her mastery lay in enacting completely diverse roles of Chandramati and Chitrangi convincingly, depicting these characters with equal aplomb, command and ease.

Papabai toured all over Andhra with the Surabhi Company and she also accompanied her foster father - Peda Ramaiah, to Rangoon and was suitably honoured by the people of Rangoon. After Peda Ramaiah's demise, she became the Manager of Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha and ran it successfully for more than ten years. She rechristened it as Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sangeetha Nataka Sabha. On seeing her talents, Kochervu Gangi Reddy was so ardently attracted by her beauty, personality, and talent that he gave up his family name to marry her and changed his name as Aveti Gangaiah. She was blessed with one son – Aveti Pullaiah, who married Govinda Rao's third daughter – Dhanalaxmi Devi. She was a great inspiration for her son while starting Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali – one of the foremost Surabhi companies and also one of the five existing companies today. Papabai died in 1933.

4. Vanarasa China Ramaiah



Vanarasa China Ramaiah was the adopted son of Vanarasa Krishnaji, one of the sons of Vanarasa Sanjeeva Rao, the known ancestor of the Surabhi family. Born around 1872, he was adopted when he was 9 years old and soon got into the family profession of puppetry and learnt music from his adopted father, who was a well-known singer. When the family took to theatre, he soon got into it with whole-hearted involvement.

A quick learner and an arduous practitioner, China Ramaiah soon became an all-rounder, and set himself as an example for other Surabhi people to emulate. He was an expert in all branches of theatre - an actor *par excellence*, singer, technician of merit, painter, moulder, dresser and backstage expert. He was also considered an expert in erecting a tent and removing it and setting up the stage with all the curtains and other special stage equipment, in the shortest span of time.

China Ramaiah shared the responsibilities of running the Samajam, first with his uncle, Peda Ramaiah and then with his brother, Govinda Rao. He also persuaded Govinda Rao to get new plays written as a result of which plays like *Kumara Vijayam*, *Ravanacharyalu* and *Dasavataaraalu* were added to the repertoire.

As an actor, China Ramaiah acquitted himself well. He played the role of 'Sahadeva' in the very first production of the Vanarasa family in Surabhi, *Keechaka Vadha*. Ever since he played all major roles. After Peda Ramaiah, he took over to do the lead roles. His portrayal of the role of Sri Rama earned the appreciation of pandits like Adibhatla Narayana Das, the Harikatha maestro. He learnt songs under the direction of Sri Adibhatla and learnt violin under Veeraswamy Pillai in Madras. While in Madras he also learnt the



As Sakara in *Mrichakatika*

art of painting from the famous painter Venunadham. He was the painter of the front curtains designed for almost all the earlier Surabhi companies.

China Ramaiah also learnt the art of dress-making and introduced embroidery and “chamki” work for the dresses which looked very elegant. He was adept in every aspect of a stage production. In fact, he was the first technical expert of the Surabhi companies.

China Ramaiah’s able portrayals of all types of roles was appreciated by one and all. He played the roles of Kamsa, Hiranyakasipa and Krurasena - the demon characters on one side and “Dheerodatta” characters like Harischandra, Rama and Anjaneya on the other. In the first *Mrichakatika* he was Sakara and his role of the thief in *Kantamathi* received high approbation.

China Ramaiah was with Govinda Rao’s Sarada Manovinodini Sabha until 1927 when he started his own company and called it Sri Sarada Manovinodini Nataka Sabha and later rechristened it as Sri Sarada Manovinodini Natya Mandali, which he bequeathed to his son Abbaji Rao. He died in 1957 at Hyderabad.

5. Vanarasa Laxmamma

Vanarasa Laxmamma, the second wife of Govinda Rao, was one of the finest first generation Surabhi actresses, who had an inexhaustible passion for acting. She was equally at ease and full of poise in romantic as well as vampish roles. Daughter of Aveti Gangaiah and his second wife Govindamma, Laxmamma’s entry into acting came only after she married Govinda Rao. Govinda Rao had married her sister Peda Subbamma earlier, but when the



company flourished and a heroine was needed, he married Laxmamma having known her singing abilities and her interest in acting. She was hardly ten years at the time. She soon learnt the arts of dialogue rendering and singing from her husband and became an asset to the company.

Laxmamma did not seem to have participated in *Keechaka Vadha* - the first play. She came into prominence with *Sarangadhara*, wherein she acted as Chitrangi while Papabai - who used to do the role of Chitrangi - did Ratnangi. Laxmamma with her cheerful face and mellifluous voice did justice to all the roles she did. She was especially known for two roles - as 'Maya Sasirekha' in *Maya Bazar* and Chandrakanta in the play of the same name. She also acquitted herself well in the role of Mohini in *Dasavataaraalu*.

Laxmamma acted in all the major plays of Sarada Manovinodini Sabha. When Papabhai acted in the major female roles, Laxmamma took up the second female lead roles. She and her sister China Subbamma acted as Anasuya and Priyamvada respectively, while Papabai did Sakuntala. In *Sarangadhara*, she was Chitrangi. The reports from *The Hindu* and *The Madras Standard* praised her as a commendable actress and a great asset to the Company.



As Mohini in *Dasavataaraalu*

She was honoured in Madras for her female lead role in *Kantamathi*. She also played Damayanti - a completely different role - in *Chitranaleeyam*, with

perfect understanding. Her roles as Pramada in *Stree Sahasam*, Kamala in *Kanakatara* and Mohini in *Dasaavataaraalu* were remembered by the audience of the day for a long time.

When Govinda Rao settled down at Polasanipalli, she also joined him there and toured with the Company very often. She was said to be a very humane person, and helped all her kith and kin.

Laxmamma lived in Polasanipalli and died on 24.11.1974 there.

6. Sindhuri (Sindhe) Narasamma



Daughter of Vanarasa Govinda Rao and Peda Subbamma, Narasamma was active on the stage throughout her life. She donned the roles of Seetha, Savitri, Anasuya, Devaki, Chandramathi and such of the roles of the heroines in her father's Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali with which she travelled all over Andhra several times and to Rangoon and Mandalay.

She married Sindhuri Venkatappaiah and together they started Sri Sarada Natya Mandali. A person devoted to her work who made a mark as an artist of exceptional merit she received encomiums both from the audience and the critics.

Having lost all their property in 1947 while camping in a Telangana village during the Razakar movement, the couple with their children came back to her father's company and continued to perform until her last breath in 2003.



Narasamma as Narada
in *Kumara Vijayam*

7. Surabhi Aveti Dhanalaxmi Devi



A second generation actress, Dhanalaxmi Devi was the daughter of Vanarasa Govinda Rao and Subbamma. Born in 1906, she was initiated into theatre at a very young age and acted as young Krishna, young Kanakasena, Prahlada, Lava and acquitted herself in all the child characters.

Dhanalaxmi Devi married Aveti Pullaiah - son of Gangaiah and Papabai. She was blessed with well-known actors as parents as well as parents-in-law. She enacted all the important female roles in the early phase of Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali. Later on, she too started a company along with her husband - Bharata Natyaopadhyaya Aveti Pullaiah. While she learnt music from Surabhi Papabai and Garikaparti Kotaiah Devara, she mastered acting techniques under the able guidance of her father - Govinda Rao. Dhanalaxmi Devi played important female roles in all the plays of her father's company and later, did all the 'character roles' in her own company, Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali. She successfully acted in the roles of Seeta in *Lava Kusa*, Kaika in *Sampoorna Ramayanam*, Laxmi in *Anasuya*, Urvashi in *Kurukshetram* and Radha in *Chintamani*. Her roles as Seeta in *Lava Kusa* and as Radha in *Chintamani* were highly acclaimed. As Radha in *Chintamani*, she showed exceptional acting abilities. For, in the later scenes Radha is shown to be turning insane. And Dhanalaxmi made her Radha appear so real that even the doctors who attended the show were puzzled if she had actually turned mad. In later years, she specialized as Yashoda in *Krishna Leelalu*, Anasuya in *Anasuya* and as Kunti in *Kurukshetram*. While playing these



As Kaisiki in
Bhookailas

characters, she assiduously combined *vachika* and *angika* aspects judiciously. She was specially equipped with a fine singing voice and, with her training in music from stalwarts she brought in a special classical flavour into the portrayal of the diverse characters she played.

She had the good fortune of having talented sons and daughters who continued the theatrical traditions she so carefully nourished. S.A. Baba Rao, Prakasa Rao, Chandra Rao, Papa Rao and Krishna Prasad were all well-known actors specialising in various roles, while her daughter Surabhi Balasaraswathi gained recognition as a character actress in Telugu cinema.

Dhanalaxmi Devi was closely associated with Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali - the company that she and her husband started in 1933. When she died, this company was taken over by her eldest son S.A. Baba Rao, with the other brothers taking active role.

She passed away in 1975.

8. Rekandar Subhadramma



Rekandar Subhadramma was the daughter of Govinda Rao and Laxmamma and was born in 1912 at Vijayawada when the company was performing there. She had her early education from her father Govinda Rao and Shri Srirama Murthy. In her 6th year she started her acting career and continued it for over 50 years. Earlier, she was an important actress of Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali - her father's theatre group, and later on in Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali - her own theatre. She married Rekandar China Venkata Rao in 1926 and founded Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali in 1937. Here, she exhibited her extraordinary skill as an actress who could play both male and female roles with equal aplomb and facility.



Subhadramma in the
role of Yama in
Sati Savitri

After Peda Ramaiah's wife - Rama Bai, who was known for her male roles, it was Rekandar Subhadramma who challengingly competed with all major contemporary actors in Surabhi as well as theatres outside in portraying all the leading male roles. Sri Rama in *Sampoorna Ramayanam*, Balarama and Duryodhana in *Kurukshetram*, Yama in *Sati Savitri*, Anjaneya in *Lanka Dahanam*, Harischandra in *Harischandra*, Vengalaraya in *Bobbili Yudham* and Narada in *Sati Anasuya*. Similarly, she had enacted the female roles of Chandramati in *Harischandra*, Chintamani in *Chintamani*, Anasuya in *Sati Anasuya* and Balanagamma in the play *Balanagamma* with unusual ease. All these roles demanded *angika*, *vachika* and *satvika* - the elements of virtuosity in a balanced proportion and Subhadramma had equipped herself well in all these areas of theatrical exposition and gained a name for her excellent acting abilities.

Besides, Subhadramma was also known to be an able instructor. Happily, she took up the responsibility of training actors and actresses of her company and did justice to it with great *elan*. Because of her inimitable rendering of poems with a stress on the *bhava* and her mellifluous singing, she was regarded as one of the topmost actresses of her time. She was honoured by several associations including the Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad for her

exceptional acting prowess. She was also one of the early singer-actors whose gramophone records were famous.

Subhadramma was also known for her administrative capabilities. She single-handedly brought her Surabhi group as one of the top-most companies and nurtured its destinies. Her helpful nature and readiness to help the needy, both in Surabhi and outside Surabhi, earned her the name of a benevolent manager.

9. Surabhi Aveti Poornima

Born on March 18, 1918, Surabhi Aveti Poornima was the daughter of Govinda Rao and Laxmamma. She was one of the illustrious actresses of Telugu theatre in the middle of the 20th century. Poornima had her early training from her parents and made her theatre debut in her fifth year, as a child artist playing roles like Sri Krishna, Lava, Kusa and the young Kanakasena. When Govinda Rao's company toured Burma and other cities, Poornima was recognized as a child prodigy and was showered with praises and gifts.



In late 1930's when many of the stage actresses left for cinema, Poornima ably filled the void with her masterly portrayals of several memorable roles outside the Surabhi groups also. In the early days of her career, she had the good fortune of being associated with Bellary Raghava, an illustrious actor-director, who sharpened the expressive skills of Poornima. Though she had her moorings in Surabhi as a child artist and later in New Poornananda Dramatic Theatres of Aveti Nageswara Rao as the female lead for a few years, she worked as a free-lancer and acted with almost all the contemporary giants of the stage. On the Surabhi stage she enacted the roles of Anasuya in *Sati Anasuya*, Savitri in *Sati Savitri* and Prameela in *Prameelarjuneeyam* with distinction. Poornima



As Anasuya in *Sati Anasuya*

also acted with Banda Kanakalingeswar Rao in many important roles such as Draupadi in *Mahabharata*, as Urvashi in *Urvashi*, as Leelavathi in *Bhakta Prahlada*, as Sakkubai, as Satyabhama, as Yasoda, Damayanthi, Chitrangi and many other memorable roles. With an original interpretation of her role, Poornima brought to the fore a new dimension of any character she portrayed.

Among the most successful of her portrayals worth their mention are *Kokila* in Panuganti's *Kokila*, *Kaika* in Panuganti's *Paduka Pattabhishekam*, *Mallamamba* in Sripada's *Bobbili Yuddham*, *Kamala* in Dharmavaram Gopalacharyulu's *Ramadas* and as *Nagamma* in Vavilala Somayajulu's *Nayakuralu*. All these plays performed in the mainstream theatre, were highly successful and her acting talents were acclaimed as unique.

Poornima started her own theatre group along with her husband, Aveti Ramaiah – the Sarada Natya Mandali – for a short while. She later joined her brother-in-law's theatre group – New Poornananda Dramatic Theatres. She later left that also and remained a free-lancer. Poornima also acted in many films including *Apavadu*, *Samanthakamani*, *Andala Ramudu*, *Mutyala Muggu* and *Seetha Rama Kalyanam*. She was honoured by Andhra Pradesh Government and several important organizations including Andhra Pradesh Sangeeta Nataka Akademi and Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad.

9. Surabhi Aveti Santhakumari

Daughter of Govinda Rao and Laxmamma, Santhakumari was born on April 6, 1923 at Jagannadhapuram in Visakhapatnam



district and took to theatre at a very tender age. Like all other children born in Surabhi families, she too started her career by performing as a child artist in roles like Lava or Kusa in *Lava Kusa*, Prahlada in *Bhakta Prahlada*, Lohitasya in *Satya Harischandra* and Krishna in *Krishna Leelalu*.

In 1939, Santhakumari was married to Aveti Prasada Rao. She was equally comfortable in male and female roles and showed her acting prowess ably. She could present the *khandita nayika* - as Satyabhama in *Srikrishna Tulabharam* with the same mastery as she did an aggressive and villainous character like Krurasena in *Kanakataru*.

Santhakumari performed major lead roles in all the plays her company produced. Out of the many female characters that she enacted, particularly memorable are : Prameela in *Prameelarjuneeyam*, Satyabhama in *Srikrishna Tulabharam*, Savitri in *Sati Savitri* and Balanagamma in *Balanagamma*.

Among the male roles, she was known for her portrayal of Sri Krishna in the Mahabharata plays, Harischandra in *Satya Harischandra*, Narada in *Sati Anasuya* and Karyavardhi Raju in *Balanagamma*. She acted in several social dramas too. In their own production of *Mahananda*, she played the lead male role and she also acted in a female role in *Stree Samrajyam*.

In 1959, she started Gajapati Natya Mandali and was active for more than twenty five years managing the company and performing in plays.

Santhakumari also earned distinction for her role of Madhuravani in *Kanyasulkam*. She was honoured by several associations including Andhra Pradesh Sangeeta Nataka Akademi.

10. Vanarasa Subba Rao



Born on October 20, 1912, at Pagalla Gannimettu village in Kadapa district, Subba Rao was the second son of Vanarasa Govinda Rao and Subbamma. In spite of frequent travels, Govinda Rao sent his son to school and Subba Rao studied upto 9th class. But soon, he chose to come back to take up important roles in Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali.

From childhood, he was brought up in the finest environment of disciplined theatre activity and soon became a front-ranking actor in the company. After his father relinquished the manager's position, he and his brother Koteswara Rao inherited the company and ran it successfully.

Subba Rao acted in all the plays of his father's company and acquitted himself well in all of them - whether mythological, folkloristic, historical or social. He was Krurasena in *Kanakatarra*, Kamsa in *Krishna Leelalu*, Manmadha in *Anasuya*, Yama in *Savitri*, Anjaneya in *Ramayanam*, Donga in *Kantamathi*, Arjuna in *Kurukshetram*, Daksha in *Parvati Kalyanam*, and Vengalaraya in *Bobbili Yuddham*. In all these

important characters he achieved a careful delineation of character and did justice to *uddhata* or *udatta* roles. He also got plays written by Viswanatha Kaviraju and Malladi Venkatakrishna Sarma for his company. He played the roles of Alexander, Kalidas, and Mayala Marathi - three different types of roles with the same equanimity. In social plays like *Mahananda*, he did a comic role of the Maharaja and he played the role of the judge in *Stree Samrajyam*, thus doing a large variety



As Mayala Marathi
in *Balanagamma*

thus doing a large variety

of roles, first under the guidance of his father and later, independently. Subba Rao was the manager of Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali from 1942 to 1970. He was honoured at several places and was given the titles "Sahaja Nata" and "Natakaavatansa."

11. Aveti Nageswara Rao



Born on July 1, 1914 at Maddanoor in Kadapa District to Aveti Venkataswamy and Anjanamma, Nageswara Rao etched for himself a name unmatched by many of his contemporaries. Venkataswamy had two wives - Anjanamma and Ramanujamma. While Anjanamma did male roles remarkably well, the latter did lead female roles and Venkataswamy himself took the comic roles.

Anjanamma had two sons and a daughter - Ramaiah, Nageswara Rao and Janakamma, whereas Ramanujamma had two daughters and two sons - Venkatamma, Bojjamma, Prasada Rao and Chalapati Rao. Nageswara Rao was the first among the performing Surabhi artists to go to a college for higher education.

Nageswara Rao was groomed as an actor, first, by his mother and later by China Ramaiah. His brother Ramaiah married Govinda Rao's daughter, Poornima and after a few years of training in Govinda Rao's company, Nageswara Rao and his brothers started their own company at the village Dopicharla of West Godavari district on Sept. 4, 1934 with the performance of *Srikrishna Tulabharam* in which he did the role of Narada. In 1937 he married Chellayamma, another daughter of Govinda Rao. For six years all the brothers performed together, but they got separated



Chellayamma



Nageswara Rao as Sakara in *Mrichakatika*

later. Though separated, his elder brother Ramaiah and his wife Poornima gave away their share and helped Nageswara Rao in financial and artistic needs. Out of gratitude, he named his company, "New Poornanada Dramatic Theatres" acknowledging his indebtedness to his sister-in-law and a versatile actress, Poornima.

Though not a great singer (his ideal on Telugu stage was Kapilavai Ramanatha Sastry, an illustrious singer-actor), Nageswara Rao was a versatile actor, having a flair for doing different roles, which earned him laurels both from the lay and the learned alike. Especially praiseworthy were his roles of Sakara in *Mrichakatika*, Ramadas in the play of the same name, as Srikrishna and Narada in *Tulabharam*, as Harischandra in *Satya Harischandra*, Sri Rama in *Lava Kusa* and Mayala Marathi in *Balanagamma*. He did a large variety of roles which depicted different *rasas* and he did them all with equal diligence.

Nageswara Rao added several new plays to the company's repertoire. For example, he produced social plays like *Abhagini*, historical plays like *Srikrishna Devarayalu*, translations of Indian plays like *Balidanam* of Tagore and Sudraka's *Mrichakatika*. He was also responsible for bringing several innovations on Surabhi stage. He was the first to introduce a trolley stage; also was the first to divide the stage into three acting units, the revolving stage and the transfer stage. He also designed a partable stage for Surabhi plays.

Nageswara Rao was also responsible for consolidating all the Surabhi groups existing then and started Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham in 1956, with himself as Secretary and Rekandar China Venkata Rao as President. On behalf of the Sangham, he organized a memorable event at Tenali in 1960 to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of Surabhi. He was justly hailed as the later-day Govinda Rao.

Nageswara Rao passed away on September 26, 1967.

12. Surabhi Aveti Baba Rao



Baba Rao is one of those Surabhi managers who have proved to be able administrators besides being actors and musicians of exceptional merit. Born to Dhanalaxmi Devi, a daughter of Govinda Rao and Aveti Pullaiah, son of that illustrious singer-actress of the first generation, Aveti Papabai, Baba Rao inherited the best in the Surabhi traditions.

Born on May 7, 1923 Baba Rao learnt the rudiments of acting and signing while on the lap of his grandmother. At a tender age, he became a disciple of "fiddle" (violin) Hanumanth Rao, who was himself a student of Garikaparti Kotaiah Devara. He learnt violin and harmonium and practised it so ardently that, at the age of 14 he became the harmonist of Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali belonging to his maternal grandfather and the founder of the Surabhi theatres, Vanarasa Govinda Rao. He became so proficient in music that he followed all the great singer-actors of his generation including Vemuri Gaggaiyah, Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao, Pulipati Venkateswarlu, Peesapati Narasimha Murthy, Panchangam Ramanujacharyulu and many many others and made a big name for himself and the art.

Baba Rao's histrionic talents did not end with music only. He earned a name as an actor of great calibre. As the drunken Balarama in *Mayabazar*, the proud Duryodhana or the valourous Arjuna in *Kurukshetram* and the ferocious Ravana in *Bhookailas*, which roles required a powerful rendering of *vachika* and virulent expressions of *angika* and *satvika*, Baba Rao acquitted himself well in all these roles.



As Kamsa in *Sri Krishnaleelalu*

Baba Rao came away from his grandfather's parent company and started his own company, Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali in 1947 with his mother as the pioneering architect, which is actively performing even today. In the beginning, the five sons of Aveti Pullaiah and Dhanalaxmi Devi performed together. Baba Rao, Prakasa Rao, Chandra Rao, Leela Papa Rao and Krishna Prasad - all the five share the credit of putting Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali on the highest pinnacle of Surabhi theatres. But later each one started his own company. Their sister was the famous cinema actress - Surabhi Balasarswathi.

Baba Rao was also fond of adding new plays into their already existing large repertoire. Besides the plays that came hereditarily to his company, he made Malladi Venkata Krishna Sarma write for him *Mayabazar*, *Bhukailas* and *Devadas*. He was also responsible for re-editing their text of *Sampurna Bharatam* and called it *Kurukshetram*, after the Gubbi Company's play. The play brought fame and name, both to Baba Rao and the company. It has become so popular that for 30 years there was no Surabhi

company which did not have it on its prominent list of plays. At 85, Baba Rao is still active, playing on harmonium for his company and directing the youngsters.

13. Surabhi Aveti Prakasa Rao



Born in 1922, Aveti Prakasa Rao was the second son of Dhanalaxmi Devi and Aveti Pullaiah. He started his acting career in 1930 as Ananta in *Kanakatara*, with the blessings of his grandfather Vanarasa Govinda Rao. He was trained in all the branches of play production by Vanarasa China Ramaiah. He was under the tutelage of his elder brother S.A. Baba Rao and enacted all major roles in the plays produced by Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali.

As an actor known for his fine expressive talent and sonorous voice, Prakasa Rao endeared himself to spectators through the major roles that he performed. He was especially known as an actor with immense stage presence and was strikingly recognizable either while delivering a dialogue or even in silences. Thus, he projected an all-round character image through action-reaction sequences. As a singer, he used special interpretative technique while singing poems or songs and judiciously used pauses and an 'intoning' method, stressing some phrases and uttering some very lightly, to great effect. He enacted the *Dheerodatta* and *Dheeralalita* characters with equal facility. And he was superb as Krishna in *Kurukshetram*, as Hiranyakasipa in *Dasavataaraalu*, as Akrura in *Srikrishna Leelalu* and as Brahmam in *Veerabrahmendra Charitra*. Some of the other characters enacted by him such as Narada in *Sati Anasuya*, as Zamindar Narayana Rao in *Devadas* and as Punnaiah in *Pratigna*, a social play, were equally endearing. For over 30 years, he regularly followed "a - 15 play - a month - schedule", (or sometimes more) with about 10,000 performances to his credit.

Prakash also acted in some Telugu films: Vrishaketu in *Rani Prameela* (1935) and as Narada in *Vinayakachaviti* (1957). Eminent critics, poets and directors lauded his character portrayal and he was honoured by several associations all over Andhra, including Andhra Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi.

Prakash was also an eminent director and back stage expert. He was an able craftsman who created sceneries and settings, did moulding work and was an expert painter. He was equally good in costume designing and in making wigs. An acclaimed actor, he was well versed in all aspects of theatre production. Prakash was thus the ideal all-round theatre personality that Surabhi theatre aimed to create.

He passed away in 1990.

14. Rekandar Bhojaraju



Born as the second son of Rakandar China Venkata Rao and Subhadramma, daughter of Govinda Rao, on October 11, 1929 at Piduguralla village in Guntur district, Bhoja Raju was a born all-rounder, who was equipped with a rare mastery for doing comic and ferocious roles. His portrayals of Duryodhana, Ghatotkacha, Hiranya Kasipa and Kamsa on one side and his comic roles of Subbi Setty in *Chintamani* and the thief in *Kantamathi* on the other earned him the encomiums of audience and literati alike. Boja Raju had a tremendous flexibility in moulding himself to suit different types of roles in diverse styles of performances. In mythological and



As Sri Krishna in
Kurukshetram



As Ghatotkacha in Mayabazar

folk plays, his portrayal of ferocious and comic roles was commendable. He also adopted himself to new situations. When B.V.Karant directed three different kinds of plays for Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali - *Bhishma*, a mythological play, *Chandipriya*, a play based on a folk legend and *Basti Devata Yadamma*, a play based on Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, Bhoja Raju played diverse roles with poise and perfect understanding in all the plays. Especially commendable were his roles of Subbi Setty, Ghatotkacha

and the thief in *Kanthamathi*, and King Santhana in *Bhishma*.

While Bhoja Raju played the demon's roles and comic roles, his wife Anasuyamma played all the leading female roles in the Venkateswara Natya Mandali.

Bhoja Raju was a great technician in all the fields – he was a wig-maker, moulder, scenic painter, electrician, lighting expert, engine mechanic, besides being a harmonist and tabla player. After China Ramayya and S.A. Prakash very few Surabhi people mastered all the aspects of theatre production including acting as Bhojaraju did.

Bhoja Raju learned these arts from the Surabhi masters of the earlier generation – from Hanumantha Rao he learned painting, from Vanarasa Gangadhara Rao tabla and from Sampangi Papa Rao harmonium.

He successfully managed Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali after his mother's death and was, to a great extent, responsible for placing it on a sound footing. Bhoja Raju passed away on 21st of September, 2005 at Hyderabad.

15. Surabhi Aveti Shyamsundar



Shyamsundar, son of Aveti Prasada Rao and Santhakumari, was born on August 27, 1940. He was born at Rajanagaram of East Godavari district, while his maternal grandfather's (Vanarasa Govinda Rao) company was touring the northern circars. Initially, he was brought up by Govinda Rao at Polasanipalli and later on by his aunt - Vasundhara Devi at Tenali and completed his school education in 1954. Like others, he too started his career as a child artist and graduated to roles like Balavardhiraju and Aswathama. In 1959, he began playing major roles in his own Gajapati Natya Mandali (Surabhi). He specialized in Uddhata characters like Duryodhana, Viswamitra, Mayala Marathi, Ghatotkacha, Hiranya Kasipa, Kamsa, Bussey, etc. However, he was equally good in comic roles like Subby Setti. He was considered one of the finest younger generation actors for his careful mastery of all aspects of character portrayal.

Shyamsundar also directed new plays for his company, especially *Maya Bazar*, *Lava Kusa*, *Veerabrahmendra Charitra* and *Gunasundari Katha* in which he showed his expertise in synthesizing the various visual and auditory aspects special to Surabhi productions with meticulous care. His passing away at an early age was a great loss for his company. Shyam Sundar also served as the general secretary of the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham until his demise in 1995 and worked assiduously for its consolidation.



Shyamsundar as Ghatotkacha

16. Surabhi Aveti Manohar



Manohar, a front-ranking actor of the younger generation, was one of the most devoted Surabhi people who loved the stage until his last breath. Born in 1942 at Akiveedu in West Godavari district as the eldest son of Aveti Nageswara Rao and Chellayamma, Manohar inherited his father's zeal for theatre. After completing his school education, he settled down in his father's company, New Poornananda Dramatic Theatres.

Manohar learnt the art of acting from his father - an accomplished actor and director. He mastered the roles of Duryodhana, Mayala Marathi, Nakshatraka and Ghatotkacha under his father's guidance and won laurels for his masterly combination of vachika and angika abhinayas. Since his father's demise in 1967, he became the manager of the Company and ran it meticulously until 1990, when the company was wound up. Manohar's fine personality, his metallic voice and his wonderful stage presence were perfect for *Udhata* roles. This fine actor and the treasurer of *Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham*, died an untimely death while doing the role of Balarama on the stage in 2003.



As Veerabrahmendra Swamy
in *Brahmamgari Charitra*

Technicians

Surabhi theatres gave equal importance to actors and technicians and always regarded them as two necessary functionaries in a production. Each team has at least one master

technician and others assisting him. His job is to overview the scenic changes, to provide proper tools for special effects, to see that proper curtains are lifted or dropped at the right time and so on.

Since the earliest days, technicians are always drawn from among the Surabhi people. Starting with China Ramaiah, each company developed its own expert technician. However, some of them stand out. Chandra Rao of the Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali was one such. With his experience earned in the cinema field he introduced some of the major effects in *Mayabazar* and *Balanagamma* which are still followed. Vanarasa Govinda Rao (Jr.), Bhojaraju and Shyamsundar were well-known backstage experts.



Surabhi Aveti Chandra Rao



Poorna Chandrasekhar

Among Surabhi technicians, working as free-lancers, mention must be made of Surabhi Poorna Chandrasekhar, whose expert handling of technical things has been well-utilized by amateur associations and even Nandi Natakotsavalu. Others popular in the field are Rayalu, Raghunath, Shankar and Kishore.

Painters

Among early painters who were closely associated with Surabhi were Gopisetty Hanumantha Rao and his two sons Nageswara Rao and Kesava Ram. All the three painted curtains and other necessary scenes for all the Surabhi teams. Later, however, many teams



Painters Kesava Ram, Hanumantha Rao and
Nageswara Rao

developed their own experts in painting. Kesava Ram is also known as a make-up man. Several youngsters from Surabhi families work in the media as make-up men today.

Other Surabhi personnel outside the Surabhi Theatre Groups

There are several people who come from the Surabhi's family theatre tradition who adhere to the profession, even after their parents' or grand-parents' companies were wound up. Though they do not strictly belong to the groups that perform as a group, they work in the mainstream theatre as individuals and work on a commercial basis. Among those that made a name for themselves, mention must be made of Vanarasa Rama Mohana Rao (harmonist) and Surabhi Jamunarayalu and Surabhi Prabhavati (actresses). Several earlier generation actresses gained recognition as actresses in the mainstream theatre among whom mention must be made of P. Satyavati, R. Koteswari, M. Vijayamba and others.

NOTES

1. The letter written to Ramaiah, by Ayyaparlapati Chemikala Channa Reddy, referring to a message sent on 28.05.1900 amply testifies to the reverence held by the public for Ramaiah's portrayal of the character of Harischandra. See *Testimonials*, pp. 13-14.

Ramaiah's portrayals of two different roles in the play *Surangadhara*, first as the king and later as the hangman has been hailed by many contemporaries. See P.S.R. Appa Rao, "Surabhi Nataka Samajamulu," *Telugu Swatantra*, July 25, 1959, p. 11.

2. V.V.L. Narasimha Rao, *Naa Natakarama Anubhavalu*, Hyderabad : Telugu Academy, pp. 103-104.



A typical medium-sized Surabhi auditorium

XII

Why is Surabhi Relevant?

Some Features of Surabhi

There are certain features that specifically distinguish Surabhi theatres from all other famous theatres in Andhra. Though some of these are acquired and consolidated over years, they have been practised by the first generation elders and passed on to successive generations. The later generations followed them by instinct as they follow religious or family rituals, customs and conventions. To many Surabhi artists, theatre is an automatic choice as a profession, because they hereditarily acquired it.

1. Theatre as Profession

The first and the foremost quality that binds the Surabhi companies is that they practise theatre as a full-time profession, without doing anything else for their living. In an otherwise non-professional environment in theatre, this theatre stands unique in continuing to be professionally sound and commercially viable. As true professionals, they are devoted to their work and are always ready to undertake any job on the stage during a performance and any work concerning their company outside the performance hours. Again, as professionals, they are ready to fulfil any task assigned to them, be it a big role or a small one. The backstage work is shared by each and everyone. A hero pulls the curtains; a villain arranges the set and the manager hands over the props. Nor do women exempt themselves. They do all the jobs which

were supposed to be the jobs of men folk with ease. They do not wait for someone else to come and do the work as work should be done on time. Alert to the requirements on the stage and the propriety of a character appearing on the stage, they share the work. Each woman, man or child knows what is required in a particular scene and what kind of setting will go with it.

Having chosen a vocation which gives them an identity, their attitude, both on the stage and off, is professional to the core: to be punctual, accommodative and to deliver the things to the best of their ability. The difference between other outside theatres and Surabhi's is that for the former groups other individuals work as backstage people, lighting men, set and property people and sound technicians, whereas in Surabhi all of them are their own brethren and many a time the actors themselves share the responsibilities. While in the other theatres, individual participants work for and expect individual recognition, in Surabhi it is for group recognition.

As true professionals, they do not depend on outsiders for their work. They stitch their own costumes including curtains, paint the curtains, do moulding work to prepare instruments and equipment for special effects. They do rehearsals in the morning time or at least go through the songs and poems with the harmonist. Everyone is alert to the work to be done and do it without someone summoning them to do it.

2. Theatre as a hereditary family profession

Surabhi is perhaps the only one theatre group which follows a family profession hereditarily acquired from ancestors. It is customary to have family professions in other areas like pottery, blacksmithy, weaving and so on. Since the emergence of the performing arts as recognized services at temple festivals there arose families exclusively attached to certain temples, and participate in devotional services through their chosen performing art. In folk performing arts and in temple arts, such a practice is seen often until recent times. The Surabhi families come from such families and continued the tradition in theatre also.

A Surabhi company consists of forty to seventy people, all of them belonging to one of the four families that originally constituted the Surabhi group - the Vanarasa, Rekandar, Aveti and Sindhe and a few outsiders, who are depending upon the companies for generations. Marriages are done within the groups - Vanarasa-s marrying either boys or girls from the other three major Aare families. Very rarely does an outsider persist to marry a girl from a Surabhi family. In case one does, he will adopt himself to Surabhi norms and family traditions. This firm and established family togetherness is the only binding force that unites all the members and also unites the actors and the managers. This is also the reason for their uniqueness as “family theatre groups” which have a venerable heredity of 120 years of continuous performance record.

However, in recent years, marriages from outsiders are becoming more common among those Surabhi people who do not live in and work for a company. Sometimes ambitious parents in the companies also do opt for outside alliances when the grooms are well educated and belonged socially to a better position. But such instances are rare.

In fact, this tradition of intra-community marriages was inherited by the Surabhi families from their ancestors. Puppet families depend upon intra-sect marriages for their solidarity even today. Some of the other practices that Surabhi people adopted until recently was sharing of the proceeds of a show. In fact, sixty or seventy years ago, the sharing method adopted by every puppeteer family was interesting : only half of the money the family got from a performance went to that family; the remaining half was distributed to all the non-participating families equally. This tradition was extended to all the puppet families in a particular village. Similar is the method adopted even now by taking into consideration the ‘right’ of the disabled and old member-families to get a share as the other families do.

However, in some families there seems to be a rift between the older generation and the new in recent years, as is the case with

families outside Surabhi, with regard to sharing of the proceeds. However, family solidarity can be seen in every aspect of their lives. They share joys and sorrows and celebrate ceremonies together. One specific custom explains how they share the common difficulties. If a company loses heavily in two successive camps, due to natural or family calamities, they decide to have a common kitchen and take a minimum amount as salary. This may go on until the company regains losses and stands firmly on its own and gains some profits.

These methods of solidarity, togetherness and affinity save at least the present families from extinction. We have also instances where a manager and his own family members behaved as bosses and within a short time the company had to be wound up.

There is yet another feature that relates the present day Surabhi people to the old puppet-day practices: it is the way in which the young children are groomed on the stage. We often hear that several Surabhi actors and actresses were born in the wings. Such a statement is a verifiable fact since the pregnant mother must have taken a major role in the play that evening and after the play was over, gave birth to a child! Many were born on their journeys from one place to the other. All this amounts to prove that the stage is Surabhi's birth place, and, of course, their death bed as well. Stage is their living place and their performing place as well.

As in the puppet days, Surabhi children also learn their rudiments of stage entry and exit, their dialogue delivery and their playfulness on the stage when they are hardly 2 to 3 years old. Even a new-born baby appears on the stage, held in the arms of the mother. Thus the stage appearance of a child along with their parents is his or her first lessons in acting! Among the puppeteers formal teaching of songs will not take place until the boy or girl will be nine or ten years old. Even by that time the children would have learnt to manipulate the puppets. So is the case with Surabhi children, who enter the stage when they are hardly 2 or 3 years old and learn 'stage behaviour' by imitating their bigger cousins.

The same technique of learning from the parents is in vogue in all family professions even now. We often hear from the elders that each one had a similar career in the childhood days – doing the roles of Prahlada, Krishna, Kanakasena, Lohitasya and so on. Thus theatre practitioners in Surabhi chisel their fine performances as artists because their profession is hereditary and they inculcate this habit of professionalism since their younger days.

3. A Repertory on wheels

A 'repertory' is an ensemble which performs a set number of plays each year and can repeat them on request. Surabhi is a repertory of a rare kind because some of the plays on their list are being performed from the last 50 years or even more. Records show that *Brahmam gari charitra* was given 155 performances by R. Narayana Rao's Sarada Prasanna Natya Kala Mandali in Huzurabad, performing on alternate days. Though this is a record, 15 or 20 performances of a play - say *Maya Bazar*, *Balanagamma* or *Kurukshetram* - have been common with every company and in every major camp.

The monotony of a single play being performed so many hundreds of times is avoided by constantly changing the plays every week or ten days and playing to different audiences. The major 10 to 15 plays in their repertoire will be performed for one or two months in a place, depending on the demand of the local people and the collections. Plays are often repeated on public demand. Thus the company is 'on wheels' all through the year and the performance cycle also moves on. Like professional groups, they repeat plays again and again if the spectators want repeat performances or when there are sponsors coming forward.

A major company will undertake tours less often because a large paraphernalia of about 3 to 4 lorry-loads of furniture and equipment along with 60 to 70 men will have to be transported if a camp is to be shifted. Accessibility of the place of performance to nearby sites is now a major deciding factor for camp shifting.

Every actor and actress of the company knows the text of the 15 and odd plays in the repertoire and they can mutually prompt one another when the play is on. Each one of the adult actors knows what curtain is to be lifted or downed when and the timing of a particular special effect. Since they live with the play, it becomes a second habit with them.

4. Commercialism and Professionalism go together

Surabhi people know very well that they will have to earn through their performances and theatre provides them their livelihood. Many contemporary critics feel that the Surabhi performances could be more artistic. They suggest thereby that such purely artistic endeavours devoid of any attempt to get profits out of them should be undertaken by them. But their work is not only to present a play on professional lines, but also to make a living out of it. However, the Surabhi companies never sacrificed art for the sake of mere commercial gains. One must remember that they will have to cater to the tastes of the common spectators in villages and towns and so must always think of balancing their professional artistic acumen with their commercial needs. In fact, their performances of *Mrichakatika*, *Vasanthasena* (two versions of the same play by two different authors), *Stree Samrajyam*, *Krishnaveni* and more recently, *Bhishma* and *Basti Devta Yadamma* show that they can perform artistic plays like any major Art Theatre in India.

If we look back at Andhra's own professional theatres outside Surabhi, it will be evident that a minimum care regarding commercial viability of a play was not looked into and consequently, the Hindu Nataka Samajam of Rajahmundry, the Mylavaram company or the Mothe company were to be wound up due to the absence of such a viable commercial attitude.

In the case of the other professional theatre groups it was not a great loss for the producers for they were rich, but in the case of the Surabhi people, the selection of a play and an artistic presentation of the same without caring for the returns, could not

be very strictly adhered to as they live on the income they get from their productions, and the income depends on the patronage of the larger section of the audiences. The managers and actors of Surabhi concede that in village productions, they introduce group dances knowing fully well that such sequences come in the way of the play's structural growth, but in towns and cities they will avoid all incongruent scenes.

As real professional groups, Surabhi companies maintain strict schedules and timings as advertised.

5. Unified Productions

Contrary to contemporary practices in Telugu theatre groups around them from time to time, the Surabhi companies had stuck to a format which would go well both with the rural and urban audiences. All their plays are groomed towards "entertainment" with an equal admixture of music, dialogue, action, comedy and dance and an abundant number of "surprises", based on technical devices. They may edit the text according to the place of performance; in villages, dance and comedy may dominate other elements. In towns action and dialogue are made prominent. However, at both the places, the "special effects" form a predominant part of a production, though other elements like diction and speech, emotional expression and stage movements are all carefully practised and synthesized.

Unlike the productions in the mainstream Telugu musical theatre, the Surabhis never overindulged in elaborate 'raga' singing! There were days when each company had at least half a dozen good singers. There were pressures to make good use of their musical expertise from audiences. But the companies did not yield. They maintained that their format was liked by audiences all over and felt no need to change. Today, however, the singing abilities are not of a desirable perfection in some of the companies. There is also a variance between the older generation actors and younger ones in their musical talents; the older generation definitely scoring a point

Each play runs as though a series of moving pictures are framed together and are allowed to move fast. The entire show runs in the same pace without losing tempo. Hauling delays for character entrances or exits, curtains not coming down or going up on time or the characters forgetting their lines are simply unimaginable in Surabhi performances.

6. Self-Reliant Groups

All Surabhi companies are self-reliant and do not depend on outside help as far as artistic and technical needs are concerned. As professional groups, they make their own set pieces, curtains, side wings, cut outs of different sizes and also make costumes, ornaments and the entire equipment used on the stage. They have company musicians from among the Surabhi people, one of whom will also be the music director.

They rarely employ outsiders as actors. If they do, they see to it that only those who can fit into the strict discipline of the company will join the company. They are to reside in the company and attend the rehearsals and performances as all other Surabhi people do. Even in cases of dire need, they avoid employing outsiders as far as possible. Instead of employing people from outside they prefer to have two Surabhi companies perform at nearby centres and exchange actors whenever needed. This is made possible as each Surabhi company performs on alternate days and on the other alternate days they can "loan" their personnel to the other company.

From the smallest item to the biggest, the company acquires its property and never depends on or waits for outside help. Under no circumstance would they borrow equipment or properties needed for a production. This is the reason why each company grooms their people to be in charge of each of the major areas of production. Since the entire process is a family enterprise and all people stay at one place, they normally do not encounter 'absence' of or 'disloyalty' from actors and technicians.

7. Interaction with contemporary theatre

While Surabhi companies follow norms that are well set by age-old practices and do not easily imitate the mainstream theatre, there is always an open mind to welcome new ideas. Even in the earlier days, Surabhi elders made it a point to interact with contemporary playwrights, actors and singers and strengthen their theatre practices. Great poet-dramatists such as Marepalli Ramchandra Kavi and Chilakamarthi Laxminarasimham went out of their way to allow them to use their plays and oblige them by making such alterations as they would desire.

Later, they took the cue from other professional theatres like the Mylavaram Company and Mothe Company to invite writers to be “resident playwrights” and write plays to suit a particular company’s acting and singing potentials! Thus eminent writers like Malladi Viswanatha Kaviraju, Kopparapu Subba Rao, Chakravadhanula Manikya Sarma, Malladi Venkata Krishna Sarma and Hari Purushotham stayed with respective companies, wrote plays to suit the company members, trained them for two months, saw to it that the first night production was put on boards and then only leave. This practice remained with the companies for over four decades.

Contemporary theoretical practices certainly influenced Surabhi companies when they produced plays with “social” content, but written in the traditional style with songs and poems. *Stree Samrajyam*, *Krishnaveni*, *Zamindar*, *Abhagini* and *Miss Prema B.A.* were successfully presented by all the companies at least for three decades. Similarly, some of the liberal-minded companies commissioned historical plays exclusively written for them during the Nationalist movement.

In the modern period such an interaction was made possible by the good offices of directors like B.V. Karanth and Tripurari Sharma and the Sangeeta Nataka Akademi as well as its Regional Resource Centre at Bangalore. Particularly helpful were Anuradha Kapur, Tripurari Sarma and B. Jayashree. The productions that



Rehearsal of *Basti Devata Yadamma*. Karanth (at extreme right) at a music session

came out were not in the general format of the Surabhi plays. But they instilled a new strength and confidence in the Surabhi youngsters that they too can accept challenges and deliver goods according to the needs of the changing times.

While the interaction between the Surabhi company (in this case the Venkateswara Natya Mandali) and the director gave positive results because it opened up new vistas before young Surabhi actors and actresses, such experiments cannot be undertaken too frequently since it involves huge financial burden to compensate the loss of revenue for the company and pay the actors during the preparation of the play. It is also not viable because the experiments made by B.V. Karanth, while qualitatively meaningful, and of high caliber, failed to add to the list of plays to be performed in the rural areas. As such, careful thought and planning should precede such new experiments.

Of course, the practice of having a 'resident' playwright is tried recently by another company (Sri Vinayaka Natya Mandali) which invited a contemporary actor-playwright, Burra Subrahmanya Sastry write and direct for it a play "Shridi Sai Mahatmyam" written by himself. Such new additions help reinvigorate the groups and make them feel that they are abreast with times.

8. Group Activity

From the very beginning of their theatrical days, Surabhi has been known only as a 'group', or as a 'company'. No individual, however important or great, is given special importance over the others. They are all equal, the manager being the first among equals. Even in the days of very prominent singers like Aveti Papabai, and Surabhi Kamalabai and Prakasa Rao no individual preference was given to them either in private treatment or public announcements. Even when Govinda Rao was performing the role of the thief in *Kantamati*, after he withdrew from stage appearances due to an accident, it was advertised that "the manager of the company will act as the thief" and no name given. The same equal treatment is given in payments. No distinction is made. It is this equi-distribution of honours and money that keeps a bondage between the managers and the members of the company. Though there seems to be slightly altered hierarchical system with the advent of the 'Manager' as the employer and the others as employed in companies, the spirit of the old single family-system prevails in most of the companies.

Such solidarity and group functioning can also be seen in their social and personal lives. Their celebration of religious ceremonies, marriages and other social functions is a testimony to this togetherness. Even if there are personal dissensions, they normally do not come in the way of their getting together and feel the 'oneness'.

This feeling of 'belonging' is nowhere better seen in helping each other in terms of professional needs. If a company is in dire need of personnel, due to reasons of ill-health or some catastrophe within a company, other companies come to their rescue by supplying men and materials so that theatre activities do not stop.

9. Role Selection and Casting

Since the beginning days, Surabhi people followed a system of casting in a way that reminds one of Bharata's *Natyasastra* that

role selection must be made taking into consideration the actor's personality (*rupa*), age (*vayo*) and the characteristics (*guna*). According to him, casting in the plays can be of three types - "Anurupa" (men playing men's roles; women playing women's roles, old men and children playing roles that suit their age). This he considers the best and Surabhi adopts this system to a great extent. In fact, in the beginning of their careers in late 19th century, people thronged the Surabhi playhouses because women were playing women's roles. And the women were playing romantic roles! This was unbelievable in those days. In the mainstream theatre, this practice was unacceptable. So much so, only male actors were donning the roles of female characters. When Surabhi women came forward to perform on the stage, it created a sensation. When they sang, people raved. And when they played the roles of heroines and they danced, it became a marked revolution.

Bharata's second prescription in casting, is "Rupanurupa" - men doing female roles and *vice versa*. Though no male does the role of a female (the only exception being demon roles like Tataki, Putana, Maya Sasirekha, etc.), quite often female actors don male roles creditably. Several important Surabhi women acquitted themselves well in male roles. Ramabai, Peda Ramaiah's wife, Aveti Dhanalaxmi Devi, Rekandar Subhadramma, Vasundharamma and Santhakumari were all known for their male roles as well as their female roles. This might also be due to the fact that, in the old Surabhi families, the women were known more for their singing abilities.

Type casting, as in all commercial theatres, is also a major method of selecting actors for the roles. Every company will have a young hero (like Abhimanyu) and an adult hero (like Sri Rama, Harischandra, Nala, etc.), a villain, a young heroine, an adult heroine and at least two 'comedy' men. There is a second rung of 'character' actors who will don the roles of saints such as Narada, Viswamitra and Vasistha. Other aged characters like Dasaratha,

Bhishma, etc. will be given to aged actors in the company. There are several instances of men and women who start with child roles, then take up adult roles and ultimately will be cast in 'character' roles. All the others will be adjusted in 'bit' roles. There is no boy or girl, man or woman that do not go on to the stage as an actor except, of course, the hard-core technicians. Even the technicians may be asked to go on to the stage, if need be, as 'filler' characters in a group.

10. Providers of Rural Entertainment

Though Surabhi companies performed in all the major cities of India and in towns and villages in Andhra with equal ease, their major contribution to the development of Telugu theatre seems to be their credibility as a healthy rural theatre at a time when cheap and obnoxious entertainment models such as "record dances" threatened to invade the rural areas. Even today people come from the neighbouring villages to a centre where Surabhi companies perform. That the elderly both in towns and villages want their children and grandchildren to see Surabhi plays is an enough testimony to the sane and healthy entertainment Surabhi companies provide even today.

If in the cities, Surabhi's technique recalls old time flavor and so is popular, in the towns it is the challenging roles that female actors take and the "effects" that run like a cinema that sustain it; in the villages it is the wholesome effect of "instruction through entertainment" along with the stunning "special effects" and the fantasy-creating atmosphere that makes Surabhi virile and popular.

Some Drawbacks

Surabhi withstood the onslaught of several upheavals in the last 120 years: lack of external support, actors leaving the company and starting new companies, migrations to towns for individual well-being and above all, the apathy of the younger generation to get into the family profession. A company which boasted yesterday of 70 members with 50 actors and 20 backstage men, now dwindles

into 50. The girls, previously married into the Surabhi families, now are being married outside and stop theatre activity. Even if someone is married into another Surabhi family, and if the in-law's family is not in the theatre profession, she has to put a stop to the activity. Very often it is the young ladies of the latter type that end up as professional actresses in the mainstream theatre.

Besides these difficulties that confront the Surabhi groups from within, there seem to be two dangers that threaten the future of Surabhi.

1. Disintegration of Combined Families

The combined family system on which all the folk theatre forms and more so the Surabhi structure was built is being threatened today. This is only an extension of such disintegration taking place in the society in general. Factors that contribute to such a change are not far to seek. One important factor is the desire of the parents to marry a girl to a well educated groom. To find a groom like that is not possible in the present situation in Surabhi for many young boys stop their education after school and get into the family profession of theatre. Even for the youthful members theatre is a less remunerative profession. It is also true that the electronic media has its attractions.

With these insurmountable obstacles, to run a professional theatre group on commercial lines is becoming more and more irksome. Several theatre groups have already wound up their activities in the last twenty years. Three of the five companies that are still in the "show business" today just survive as the elders insist they must continue because it is a "family profession" and they received patronage, respect and recognition because of it. We do not know how long this insistence can hold up against opposition from the young generation. Friends of Surabhi must sit together and think of a possible solution for attracting young men into the company and retain them there, and to enable the companies to do so, without the youngsters losing their educational opportunities.

The Central and State governments help the groups by way of salary grants and by providing occasional performance grants, but, unless the groups themselves decide to make their hereditary venture a success and worthwhile and add to their financial well-being and psychological satisfaction, they are bound to call it a day and wind up their activities as others did two to three decades ago.

The only hope now is that some of the private and public organizations are coming forward to sponsor the plays either during village festivals or during other melas. Some of the teams are also camping in towns and performing as their elders had done fifty years ago. This is a welcome feature. But this would happen once or twice a year.

2. Actors' Training

The second difficulty that confronts a Surabhi group is the general standard of their acting abilities. In spite of their excellent stage sense and timing, many of them are habituated to rant and rave as in the old days. Diction and speech among the young generation actors is much to be desired, a reflection of the general fall in perfect diction in the outside theatre itself. Musicals were once praised by one and all, but now very few can render 'ragas' as they should be. This is an internal problem which each of the groups must attend to. Teachers in theatre music and diction coaches are the need of the hour.

3. Shifting of a Camp

The third and the most horrifying of the factors is the shifting of a camp from one place to the other. It is a heavy burden on the group to wind up a camp and start a new one and transport the entire furniture, equipment and personal belongings of about 50 people, each time a camp is shifted. It is in this area that the government can help by providing some subsidy in transport expenses.

4. Other difficulties

When once a camp is selected, the difficulties of electricity and water connections emerge. The present electrical charges are very high. When the government is helping the farmer with free current and if it can provide the poor families with 'free' current, it can as well extend some facility to these groups and come to their help so that a long and unique tradition will be resuscitated to provide healthy entertainment to the rural as well as urban audiences, and also to uphold traditional values.

However, Surabhi must and will overcome these difficulties to continue to entertain both rural and urban audiences with such stage productions that they alone are capable of offering.

Let Surabhi strengthen itself to fill in gaps that mainstream theatre cannot afford to fill and continue to be a living performing tradition of Andhra Pradesh for a long time to come.

NOTES

1. The letter written to Ramaiah, by Ayyaparlapati Chemikala Channa Reddy, referring to a message sent on 28.05.1900 amply testifies to the reverence held by the public for Ramaiah's portrayal of the character of Harischandra. See *Testimonials*, pp. 13-14.

Ramaiah's portrayals of two different roles in the play *Surangadhara*, first as the king and later as the hangman has been hailed by many contemporaries. See P.S.R. Appa Rao, "Surabhi Nataka Samajamulu," *Telugu Swatantra*, July 25, 1959, p. 11.
2. V.V.L. Narasimha Rao, *Naa Natakarama Anubhavalu*, Hyderabad : Telugu Academy, pp. 103-104.

Postscript : Surabhi - Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

Starting from very humble beginnings Surabhi has grown, over years, in stature and has proved that a family profession can achieve success as no other commercial enterprise can. The family unity, though often threatened by internal dissensions and external attractions, is the one single reason that sustained Surabhi and made it, perhaps, the only professional family theatre in the world to run for 120 years. An administrative and functional set-up has ushered into Surabhi's working methodology. This is the manager- actor combination.

Over the last forty years, things have changed substantially. Because of overhead expenses, it has become burdensome for company managers to continue activity. If financial inability and the desire of some of the important actors to leave and take up non-professional jobs (mainly freelancing) come together, a manager has nothing else to do except winding up the company. Several important companies were wound up. Even the five companies that exist now continue to do a precarious tight-rope walking. While help from the Department of Culture, Government of India, in the nature of limited monthly salaries is most welcome, help from the State Government is slowly increasing. The State Government cannot satisfy itself by giving a few lakhs of rupees every year (it has increased its help by five fold in the recent four years) for the five companies. More than monetary help the need

is more in the area of providing infrastructural facilities, especially in terms of transport facilities, providing electricity on relatively low charges (if not completely free) and local help in facilitating the erection of a hall etc. Facilities in providing electricity, as is given to farmers in the village, on a concessional slab will go a long way to help the existing companies. Until now the companies themselves are contacting the local people of a village to get the required help. A word from the official machinery will help in changing the attitude of the local authorities.

From their side, the few remaining companies will have to do a lot to uphold the laudable traditions established by their visionary forefathers. First of all, they must better the quality of their performances. Instead of relying solely upon the “effects”, each Surabhi company must be able to present “wholesome” performances - with equal emphasis on music, speech and technical effects. Right now, many actors fall short of perfection in diction. Music is not what it was once. These can be rectified by constantly monitoring the training of their younger generation artists in these areas.

It is commendable that many of the youngsters go to schools and colleges. Simultaneously, they must also have theatre training through workshops. This training should be only in providing the actors the necessary inputs in *vachika* and *sattvika*, two weak elements in the majority of Surabhi actors, though they are better when compared to those of the actors of the mainstream theatre.

Those that belonged to the previous generation had been taught to deliver the speeches in a rhetorical, high-toned manner, which today sounds artificial. This melodramatic tinge brings in an artificiality. All these elements can easily be rectified if constant, yearly workshops are arranged.

Another important point to be considered by the companies is the need to bring in new plays into their list. It is very difficult for the managers to decide what could be the right choice of a play.

The few experiments made in recent years remained only as “experiments”. They cannot be performed both in the towns and villages. New plays with a modern perspective, but with all the necessary ingredients of a “Surabhi play” must be specially commissioned to be written.

It is the cherished dream of every theatre lover that this potentially rich cultural heritage of Andhra Pradesh be made to live long and not merely keep it as a “cultural artefact” but an image of a living tradition of wholesome and healthy entertainment.



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THE SURABHI THEATRE OF ANDHRA : A LIVING LEGEND is a major study of the rich professional family theatre tradition of Andhra, which is alive and vibrant for the last 120 years and more. This study, based on family records, performance reviews and personal documents of actors, managers, writers and patrons, presents a history of several performing companies belonging to four distinct families through six generations - all called 'Surabhi' theatres because of their common ancestral place from where a single family embarked on a theatrical journey in 1885 and embraced theatre as profession. Recording history, the book examines the theatrical background, literary corpus, performing techniques and the urban-rural milieu that conditions the nature of Surabhi's performances.

Pioneering in its approach to regional theatre history, this volume casts important light on the relations between theatre and society resulting in a pluralistic theatrical approach to the field of performance studies during late 19th and early 20th centuries in Andhra.

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Author of over 25 books - 15 in Telugu and 10 in English in addition to several research papers on all performing art traditions, he contributed seminal articles to *Oxford Companion to Indian Drama*, *Cambridge Cyclopaedia of Theatre and Performance*, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literatures* and other International publications. A researcher in folk performing arts and Dance Studies, Professor Sarma now edits a quarterly journal on Indian Classical dances, *Nartanam*.

