

I. ORIGINS OF TELUGU THEATRE

Origins of Telugu theatre go back to 2nd century B.C. Even by the time of the writing of *Natyasastra*, 'Andhri' has been identified both as a recognizable linguistic entity, which has an established musical identity. The excavations at Nagarjunakonda had revealed the existence of an amphitheatre on the banks of Krishna, which, after the Ranigumpha cave theatre, is termed as the earliest open-air amphitheatre in India. Inscriptional and sculptural evidence show that there has been a continuous and sustained activity in all the performing arts in Andhra Desa. The earliest Telugu poet who initiated the translation of *Mahabharatam* into Telugu, Nannaya (9th century A.D.) had written that he started writing the epic after having read great Sanskrit poets and 'witnessing' many plays, which is a clear indication that theatre activity was a well-established creative activity. The 13th century poet, Palkuriki Somanatha, enumerated the several types of plays that were in vogue at the time. He extolled how the "sanga-bhashanga-kriyanga patu natakamulu" have been a part of every festival, along with several types of folk theatre performances like the leather puppet shows. The phrase "sanga-bhasanga-kriyanga patu natakamulu" clearly indicates that plays containing all the constructional rules (satangas), all the nuances of language (bhashanga) and all the devices of action (kriyanga), which, when happily blended, would result in perfection (patu natakamulu) and such plays were in abundance at the time.

Plays containing all the rules and regulations involved in 'vachika' and 'angika' abhinayas prevalent in 13th and 14th centuries was also evidenced from the only existing example of a play, *Kridabhiramam*, (late 14th c.) written by Vallabharaya. Poetic texts from 9th century to 19th century are full of references to either the writing of plays or their performances. The Tayikonda Natakam performed by Sri Ranga Raja and the members of his family in the court of Srikrishna Devaraya for which he was honoured by the king with the title, "vidwat-sabha-ranjaka" and the famous incident of the Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu enacting the misdeeds of a local chieftain through their kelika, for which act, the chieftain was punished were standing examples both of the popularity and the importance of dramatic performances.

From the sixteenth century onwards plays with extensive dance and music had become popular. The Bhagavatha-Mela Natakams, the Yakshaganams and the Veedhi Natakams gained the approval and appreciation of the rural audiences all over Andhra.

EMERGENCE OF MODERN TELUGU THEATRE

It is a fact that English educations had resulted in creating an awareness among literate people about the new vistas opened. The establishment of the three Universities at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1857 had quickened the process of renaissance and, as a result, people with creative minds were not only influenced by English classics and tried to translate them into their native languages, but also were made aware of the richness of the native literatures. In this attempt to synchronize novelty and modernity with traditions, theatre became the most fertile medium, for it had also imbibed the performance strategies from the visiting English dramatic companies either directly or indirectly.

Two types of plays, modelled on two distinct styles of presentation, are discernible during this synchronizing attempt: some plays followed the native traditions with an

emphasis on the creative originality of the practitioners and some plays closed imitated the early 19th century. English models and were largely based on music, melodramatic acting methods coupled with dazzling technical virtuosity. While the former one may be called the Bhava model, the latter one may be termed as the Parsi model. Both these have simultaneously been practised in almost all the language theatres since 1840's. Though started two decades later, Telugu theatre also followed the same models.

Early Telugu drama owes its beginnings to translations from Sanskrit and English. Kokkonda Venkataratnam, a Telugu teacher from the Presidency College, Madras translated *Narakasura Vijaya Vyayogam*, quickly followed by translations of *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* (Paravastu Rangacharyulu and Kandukuri Veeresalingam). Then came Vavilala Vasudeva Sastry's translation of *Julius Caesar*. These early attempts must be looked more as symbol of love and love for a new tradition. These early attempts remained only as pieces of literature, for theatre activity had not yet been ushered in.

It was in early 1880 that Kandukuri Veeresalingam, the reformer-literateur who used his scathing pen to modify public beliefs and morals, presented the first-ever dramatic production in modern theatre – *Vyavahara Dharma Bodhini* – written, directed and produced by him in a local school at Rajahmundry with his own students and friends in the cast.

It was during these formative days came the Tanthipurastha Nataka Samajam, commonly known as Dharwada Nataka Samajam for the company came from Dharwad, which extensively toured in Andhra during 1880-81. This was a well-trained Marathi dramatic association which performed both in Marathi and Hindi. It presented plays based on epical stories and legends. The performances were neat and immaculately organized; it's acting sober and reflecting the characters' moods; it's singing after the classical Hindustani style. In face, it set the right pace. It immediately caught the imaginations of the theatre enthusiasts all over Andhra, who have all educated, elitist and cultured.

These enthusiasts soon became theatre activists. To whichever town the Dharwada Company went and performed, it generated a new impacts. It eventually resulted in small, amateur theatre groups being started in town after town. In the same palm-leaf hall which the Dharwada company built for its own use, and left behind after their performances, Kandukuri presented two plays, *Ratnavali*, Sri Harsha's Sanskrit play and *Chamatkara Ratnavali*, Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, both translated and directed by him. In the same year, 1881 two more important amateur theatre groups were formed in Guntur and Machilipatnam. The Guntur Company was started by a teacher in the local college, Kondubhotla Subrahmanya Sastry who wrote and directed thirty two plays. The Guntur Company consisted of students mainly but it also received help from adult enthusiasts. It is unfortunate that none of these plays is saved for posterity, but contemporary evidence from actors and audience confirm that the list contained almost all the plays that were hits in the next quarter century! Another achievement of this company was that is undertook performance tours in the neighbouring districts, the first one to do so!

The second theatre group that was inspired by the Dharwada Company was the National Theatrical Company, which, in its initial years, performed plays only in Hindi, after the Dharwada group. This group enlisted the support of many actors who got into fame in the following years. Emani Laxmana Swamy, who was spoken with reverence and one of the versatile actors of the first generation, belonged to this group. The author, Nadendla

Purushothama Sastry, wrote 37 plays in Hindustani for this company. He also included *tappas*, *bhajans* and *keertans* as in traditional folk plays.

Two interesting things stand out in the development of drama: one, in this first phase: the quick consolidation of amateur theatre activity in the important centre of amateur and two, that all the theatre activity was done under the aegis of teachers, that too Telugu teachers exposed to English educations. Kandukuri, Nadendla, Kondubhotla, Vaddadi and others were teachers with visionary minds.

The earliest theatre group at Rajahmundry, started by Kandukuri Veeresalingam, was soon wound up due to parental pressures, but the others two, along with some new groups, flourished for a long time.

The second phase in the emergence of modern Telugu drama started in 1886, when Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu, a lawyer by profession, wrote and produced his musical play *Chitranaleeyam* at Bellary, his home town, under the banner of his own theatre group, Sarasa Vinodini Sabha. This play ushered in a new trend in Telugu drama, which contained to dominate Telugu theatre for the next fifty years. Firstly, while the plays performed until now came from Telugu pundits of the coastal Andhra, Dharmavaram and the playwrights that came immediately after him belonged to the Rayalaseema region and were lawyers by profession. Dharmavaram and another playwright from Bellary, Kolachalam Srinivasarao were more systematic in their presentation of plays, for they started a group, gave it a name and provided bye-laws, enlisted members who consisted both of actors and patrons.

There is yet another major contribution Dharmavaram initiated. His plays and the plays following his model are called “Padya Natakams”. “Padyam” is a metrical stanza. Singing these dramatic stanzas with ‘raga’ – musical enunciation – is the thrust of these plays as presented by Dharmavaram. Hitherto, even in the plays of Kandukuri, Vaddadi Subbarayudu and others, there were poetic stanzas, but they were merely ‘recited’, but not ‘sung’. Dharmavaram was influenced in using the dramatic stanza by the traditional ‘bayalata’ traditional. He was also influenced by the visiting Parsi theatre groups in incorporating songs in his plays. He used thematic songs elaborately in the twenty seven plays of his twenty eight plays (exact in a later-day play, *Ajamila* which was a prose play). When Dharmavaram travelled the coastal Andhra region with his three plays – *Chitranaleeyam*, *Vishada Sarangadhara* and in 1888, his plays caught the coastal Andhra theatre goers like wild fire. The authors and actors alike felt that the Telugu drama had finally found its form. The coastal playwrights, who were greatly influenced by this judicious combination of prose dialogue and poetic dialogue, with occasional songs, chose to limit their own plays with poems.

Contemporary literary scene contributed largely to the acceptance of the musical play as the model. It was commonly believed the writing poetry was the acme of literary activity. They were the days when even Mathematics and rhetoric were written in the stanzaic form. Anyone who knew how to use the metres became a playwright and yet was regarded highly in the literary field. Different innovations and experiments were made by the playwrights-poets irrespective of their dramatic need. Plays written in prose prior to 1888, the year Dharmavaram’s team toured the coastal Andhra towns, quickly got poems incorporated into them, though it must be said, with all reasonableness, that the poems thus added became very popular. (*Gayopakhyanam*, written by Chilakamarti Laxminarasimham, is a case in point.

Because of the popularity of the play and its poems, the play sold a record number of a lakh of copied by 1938).

The Dharmavaram model had come to stay. The model contained captivating musical rendering of poems, new themes based on either Pauranic stories or local legends, intricate plot development and of course brilliant acting. The coastal Andhra playwrights took to the musical play like horses to water for obvious reasons. Firstly, the musical play offered an opportunity to the playwrights to show their expertise in writing poetry (for, writing poetry was for long considerable the hallmark of an author). Secondly, it had added a new dimension to the plays since they contained dramatic themes ensconced in poetic excellence. However, the early practitioners did not visualize the damage that such an over use of poetry could wrought on drama. Many plays became apologies for music concerts. In course of time, this led to an elaborate rendering of music at the cost of the dramatic qualities.

Between 1888 and 1890, several poets took to playwriting. As before, Sanskrit plays and English plays continued to be translated. Translations from Sanskrit had an established method: slokas translated into padyam and Sanskrit prose into Telugu prose. The same method continued even after the advent of Dharmavaram; only there were more verses now than before. As regards English plays, a new trend slowly emerged. Except C.S.R. Krishnamma's translation of *Macbeth*, which was a translation and was in prose, all others were adaptations, changing the names of the characters and nativizing the locales.

Original plays were few and far between. Two noteworthy plays appeared later: Gurazada Venkata Apparao's *Kanyasuklam* (1892) and Achanta Venkata Sankhyana Sarma's *Manorama* (1895). The performance of the prose plays did not attract audience.

During 1870's and 1880's several Parsi companies toured South India, Madras being a major centre of their performances. The most important among them was Sanglikar Natak Company which made annual visits to Madras and also Mysore. Their influence modified the staging strategies of already well-known companies and made possible new companies on the same lines to emerge.

The next phase of Telugu theatre history depended mainly on the emergence of a new trend which combined the Dharmavaram model with the Parsi model, the latter with elaborate music, songs, dances and technically perfect stage tricks.

Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu, known as the Grandfather of Telugu Drama was influenced further by the visiting teams from Mysore – the 'Rangacharlu Natak Company' and the 'Shakuntala Karnataka Natak Sabha' – who had paid a number of visits to Bellary early in 1880. H.K. Ranganath in his 'The Karnataka Theatre' noted that the Thanthipurstha Nataka Sabha from Dharwad, in turn, visited the Andhra towns later in 1880 and changed the entire structure and performed techniques of the Telugu theatre.

The Dharwada Nataka Company had exercised considerable influence on the newly upcoming Telugu theatre. The stage had acquired a new radiance. Several innovations transformed the stage. Dazzling costumes came into vogue. Stage décor underwent changes. The poorva ranga included salutations to Vinayaka and Saraswathi, who appeared on the stage and blessed both the actors and the audience. The plots were well constructed and had chaste, sanskritised Hindi so that it was easily appreciated by the elitist audiences. Though at first only Pauranika plays attracted the attentions of the playwrights, historical plays, social

plays and farces caught their imagination in course of time. This gradual change was a pointer to the changing tastes of the spectators.

The Parsi Theatre's influence on Indian theatre can never be easily assessed. On one side, it was very popular. It had all the ingredients of entertaining the balcony. Its themes are laden with fantasy and make – believe. It especially chose mythological stories or themes from Arabic or Indian legends which offered scope for mesmerizing scenic devices – fights, sudden appearances and disappearances. It had elaborate and awe-inspiring sets which used the 18th century British melodramatic presentations. Its multiple rolling curtains covered either side by synchronizing flats added to the make-believe scenario. It also provided ample scope for adventure: especially its adventures of supernatural beings. Another important factor that allured audiences all over was its music. It straightaway made use of Hindustani music, with all its sonorous variations. Since pathos, valor and love are the most exciting emotions the themes offered, they has ample scope for musical rendering. Music and songs became not only a prominent component of Parsi theatre; but the songs were also popular outside the theatre. Its other attractions were gorgeous costume and nerve-racking tricks. It looks as though that there are two broad styles influenced the early Telugu theatre: we can perhaps call the first one – the elitist style. This largely catered to the educated classes and so was choosy in the subject taken and their treatment. They had a classical touch in writing for many playwrights were poets and play writing was yet another way for showing their poetic excellence. So it contained all kinds of rhetorical devices. It had decent curtains, often suggesting the locale rather than attempting a near-realistic perspective of a locale. Its costume and ornaments, wigs and make-up (as it was available at the time) attempted to present the characters in their symbolic best. Songs and music strictly adhered either to the Karnatak or Hindustani ragas.

The second type was the commoner's style. It followed the norms of the Parsi theatre style – quick changes of locales almost within the wink of an eye, elaborate sets, glowing lights, elaborate singing, glaring costume and exciting tricks and fantasy scenes. This was partly because of the audience's expectations and demands. In the former the audience followed the author-director, in the latter the performers followed the diktats of the audiences.

The next phase of Telugu drama during which time the Surabhi Theatre originated showed a strong impact of both the types of theatre styles.

BACKGROUND

ORIGINS OF THE SURABHI THEATRE

The Nayaka Kings ruled Southern India with Thanjavur as their capital. When Sivaji II was appointed as regent first and then the king, thousands of soldiers, artisans and other professional people accompanied him. Generations of these families went on living either at the royal court or in the army. During the Nayaka period several performing artistes also came different parts of the South including Maharashtra and settled there.

When the Nayaka Kingdom collapsed, hundreds of families had to seek their livelihood outside the court. Each sub-community chose an occupation similar to the one they

were doing in court. Thus several families belonging to the army and now no more in that profession offered their services to the remote villages to guard their villages from theft and pilferage. This community was called “aare-kapas”, combining the linguistic-occupational work involved in their profession. “Aare” is a dialect of Marathi and was spoken by some lower sects of people of the vidarbha region. They are employed to guard (‘Kapu’ means ‘guarding’) the villages; to protect the people. They were all able-bodied people whose ancestors worked in the army. The ‘aare-kapus’ were dependable guardians of rural wealth and people. Less valourous people chose other menial jobs to eke out their living. The origins of the Surabhi people can be traced to this aare-community, now rehabilitated in various villages both in the Mysore state and the Andhra region, especially in the Rayalaseema area.

Some of these families migrated from Mysore area and settled down in Rayalaseema area. In mid – 19th century the ancestral families of “aare” people were employed by the East India Company to suppress the Pindari and other Dandit groups in Rayalaseema. It was understood that the ‘aare’ fighters boldly attacked the highway robbers and stopped their unlawful activities. They even caught hold of many leaders and handed them over to the East India army. The British government was so pleased with the aare-people that the immigrant aare-people, belonging to the Vanarasa people were gifted thousands of acres in the Rayalaseema Taluk of Bellary district. This gift document is in the family of Vanarasa Venkoba Rao, who settled down in Karimnagar district. That is how the aare families settled ultimately in Bellary district.

There are several aare-families among these settlers, the major family being the Vanarasa family. After three or four generations, the Vanarasa family grew into several branches. Three such branches are discernible: they went to three different areas: one family came southwards and settled down in Cuddapah and Anantapur districts. This branch is known as the Surabhi branch. The second one, known as the Ramadurgam branch (that of Vanarasa Venkoba Rao) and settled down in the Telangana area and the third one is the Balakonda branch. Several people of the Balakonda branch later on joined the cinema industry in Bombay. The only Vanarasa family (and its allies) that chose performing arts as their profession is the Vanarasa family that is popularly known as the Surabhi branch.

Vanarasa Sanjeeva Rao:

The known ancestor of the Vanarasa family is Sanjeeva Rao, who along with his elder brother took to agriculture as his profession. He also owned a small liquor business. While his elder brother was looking after agriculture, Sanjeeva Rao was in-charge of the liquor business. In course of time he took to heavy drinking. The children of the elder brother did not take Sanjeeva Rao’s way of life very kindly. The eldest son among them insisted that they divided their property. Agitated at the demands of his brother’s children and in a fit of anger, Sanjeeva Rao denied his share of the family property.

Sanjeeva Rao and his family lived on the meagre income from the liquor business; but incensed by the behaviour of his family members, he became more and more sensitive to criticism. This landed him in trouble when, during a festival of the local goddess to overcome draught situations, the participants believe that human sacrifice was needed, Sanjeeva Rao offered himself to the goddess. According to the legend prevalent in the family circles, Sanjeeva Rao was said to have thrown himself on the goddess’s trident. Though

Sanjeeva Rao fulfilled an oath and accepted a challenge and killed himself. The large family was thrown on to the roads because of his sudden death.

Sanjeeva Rao had two wives: Chennamma and Anjanamma. Chennamma has seven children – six sons and one daughter. Anjanamma had three children – two sons and one daughter. Chennamma's sons – Ramaiah, Subbaiah, Veeraiah, Krishnaji (called Peda-elder-Krishnaji, for another son of Sanjeeva Rao by his second wife was also named Krishnaji: he was called 'China' – smaller or younger – Krishnaji), Venkoji, Ramaiah (he is known in Surabhi theatre circles as Peda – elder – Ramaiah) and Ammannamma, the only daughter. In fact, the first – mentioned son, Ramaiah was to be called Peda – Ramaiah for he was the 'elder' Ramaiah, but it was not to be so. Since he never came into the profession of performances, he was simply called the first ('modati') Ramaiah. Anjanamma, Sanjeeva Rao's second wife had two sons – Kondaiah and China Krishnaji and a daughter, Hanumakka.

The responsibility to bring up the children was reposed on the two widows. The eldest son, Ramaiah, also shouldered responsibility until they settled at Surabhi. In a situation where there was no agriculture land to cultivate and no family occupation to follow, some of the brothers, with musical inclinations, decided to put musical interest into profession use. They decided to learn the most popular art prevalent all over Andhra at the time – leather puppetry (Tolu Bommalata) and earn their livelihood through the performances.

Aare Performers of the Shadow Puppet Theatre:

Tolu Bommalata (Leather Puppet Play) has been a very popular type of folk theatre form prevalent all over Andhra. The shadow puppet, cut from a piece of flat rawhide or stiff parchment, was one of the most ancient forms of entertainment. The leather puppet tradition was originally practised by the 'Jangam' community, the first-known professional group of singers. Jangams are Saivite propagators, who toured (jangama: touring) from place to place singing in praise of Lord Siva and his *leelas*. They sang stories on Shiva and also performed puppet shows. Palkurki Somanatha, a Shaiva poet of the 13th century, mentions two types of puppets – those that are manipulated behind white curtains and those that are played with rods. The former ones are the leather puppets whereas the latter ones are rod puppets. Somanatha's description is of particular importance because it proves beyond doubt that the shadow puppet theatre had a well-established tradition in Andhra even by 12th century and it is also pertinent to find that the Jangam's presentations had taken place during the Sivaratri festival at Srisailam temple. Thus the shadow puppet shows were perhaps one of the most popular forms of rural entertainment in Andhra.

The aare families that migrated from Bellary and settled down in Rayalaseema, especially the family of Vanarasa Sanjeeva Rao and its close kin had taken to shadow puppetry, partly out of necessity and partly because they were knowledgeable about its music.

The three elder sons of Chennamma – Ramaiah, Subbaiah and Veeraiah accompanied the other brothers for the performances, but did not actually participate in them. So was the case with the children of Anjanamma. They continued their old Aare profession as guards of the neighbouring villages and were known as 'Nayaks'. It was still a combined family – the mothers and their ten children. The other sons – Krishnaji, Venkoji and Ramoji along with

Ammannamma learnt the art of puppeteering so well that they soon earned enough money to sustain the family. Each one, in addition to singing and manipulating the puppets, also learnt one of the three things that were needed in the backstage. Krishnaji became an expert 'mridanga' player, Venkoji played on the violin and Ramoji was a great 'tala' player. The accompanied the performance when they were not themselves manipulating the puppets. Venkoji evinced puppet-making and also in using appropriate colours for the keen interest in shadow puppets. His style of making the puppets was followed by puppeteers for a long time. Ammannamma, known as Ammanni, was a great singer and usually took the lead female roles. The Puppeteer family was also fortunate in having Papabai, the daughter of Sanjeeva Rao's eldest sons, Ramaiah – a mere girl of ten years by that time (circa 1870) but received encomiums from everyone for her sweet voice and sonorous singing. When she was to accompany the touring team, Peda Ramaiah adopted the girl and ever since looked after as his own daughter.

Puppeteering was an itinerant profession. The entire family had to move from one place to the other, sometimes on a cart, but many times by walk, carrying their belongings and the puppets. In 1875, when they were performing at a small village 'Kayalapalli' in Kadiri taluk of Cuddapah district, a young man by name Kochervu Gangireddy, saw their performance and was greatly impressed by Papabai. He travelled along with them to the next village and revealed his intention of marrying the young girl! The family was shocked! They tried to argue that they were poor performers and were earning to make both ends meet. They said that they had to move from place to place and were not prepared to leave young Papabai behind in an unknown place and an unfamiliar family. Gangireddy counted all their arguments. Finally the elders said they were not Telugu people by birth and they were much below the social status of the Reddys.

Gangireddy was reticent. He changed his name and his family name as well in order to marry Papabai. He called himself Aveti Gangaiah – 'Aveti' or 'Avet' being the family or village name of Papabai's maternal uncles. (A maternal uncle's son is eligible to marry a sister's daughters, according to Telugu customs). Ever since that time he lived with the family and helped it both financially and morally.

The three brothers – Krishnaji, Venkoji and (Peda) Ramoji, along with Ammanni and Papabai toured the Cuddapah and the neighbouring villages extensively. They still did not have a permanent home. Like all itinerant groups, they also staged for a week at a village, requested the village Headman and the Landlords to sponsor their shows and stayed in the village as long as it paid for the shows. Their mother Chennamma followed them wherever they went. So did Aveti Gangaiah. They stayed usually in a local choultry or even under a tree if the weather permitted.

The team now was a big one – the three brothers, their wives, and the two daughters Ammanni and Papamma and their mother. The shows were very popular and the family at last had a comfortable living. Though their social status and financial gain remained more or less the same, they had ample work which gave them enough to live upon and also an aesthetic pleasure that they could entertain all the sections of the people.

The family, around 1877-78 moved on to Cuddapah taluk and was giving shows at a village called Hanumadgundam. The shows were at the local landlord's house. At this place was found a young lad who later came and honoured to, be known as Vanarasa Govinda Rao,

with the title “Andhra Nataka Kalodharaka” for his services to Telugu theatre and the founder of the Surabhi Theatre.

GOVINDA RAO’S EARLY LIFE:

‘Govinda Rao’ was the name given by his foster parents, Venkoji and his wife Suntamma. His original name was Pakeeranna. His parents – Gampa Ramana and Pakeeramma – belonged to the Setti Baliya community and were farm labourers. The entire Rayalaseema area was struck in famine in that year. In order to provide some employment to the needy the government employed labourers to lay down a road from the nearby town Jammalamadugu to the village, Hanumadgundam. Pakeeranna’s parents also worked on the project. But, during the mid-summer, both the parents were attacked by cholera and died. Pakeeranna became an orphan. A cook with the English engineer in-charge of the road works, Besta Rosanna, took pity on the orphan boy and fed him. Meanwhile he worked as an errand boy in a mercantile shop. Wherever he went, Pakeeranna earned the good will of his bosses and benefactors because of his hard work and willingness to learn.

It was at this time (about 1877), the Puppeteering group, after giving successful shows at Jammalamadugu, came to Hanumadgundam and put up their performances in the royal palace. One day, the trio’s (Krishnaji, Venkoji and Ramoji) mother saw Pakeeranna, now out of job because of small-pox, with his face besmeared with boils and no one to look after. She took pity on the boy, brought him home and nourished him. When he recovered, she learnt that he was an orphan. On her advice, her son Venkoji and his wife, Suntamma, adopted the boy and they gave him a new name – Govindappa. As this was almost a new birth to him, the boy also accepted the couple as his parents. He also considered the other brothers, their kith and kin as his dearest people and held life-long gratefulness to all of them. By now, he was nine years old.

For the next seven years, Govindappa had a rigorous daily routine. During the morning he took the cattle for grazing. In the evenings he started learning the nuances of the puppet shows. He learnt tala patterns from Peda Ramaiah (Ramoji), violin from his father Venkoji and mridangam from his uncle Krishnaji. He soon learnt the plays and their manipulation. He also started to accompany his parents, for shows to several places. Wherever he went, he took time off to see whatever other performances were taking place. This experience had given him a wider perspective and an opportunity to compare his own newly-acquired expertise of a new profession with other performing arts traditions. Though, on one side he enjoyed his puppet performances, he was also looking at the sad plight of the performers themselves. Though they were no less experts in their own art, the treatment meted out to puppeteers was pitiable. They were looked after as untouchables. They had each show must go from house to house to collect alms. This experience shocked the young mind. He knew that their own artistic expertise was no less proficient.

The young ripened mind of Govindappa slowly rebelled against this plight. He tried to argue with his father that they should look for an alternate profession. But the parents knew nothing else. So they rebuked Govindappa to silence. But the rebel in him reacted so much that he went away from home without informing anyone.

Govindappa was also exposed to other kinds of dramatic entertainment in and around the places of their shows. He saw that they were enjoyed by the audience well and there was

a live encounter between the actors and the audience. He himself felt it. Besides, the actors were treated with respect. They also happened to see Kannada performances in the border areas. Especially attractive were the Aaramane Company (the Royal Company patronized by the Mysore royalty) and the Karnataka Nataka Mandali of Shanta Kavi. They also saw the local Bayalata performances which were a great attraction during any religious festival, especially of local gods and goddesses. Having felt that puppetry did not give them the kind of artistic recognition and social status it deserved, he decided to run away from home to avoid this infliction.

Govindappa, now a young man of eighteen, went far away from Cuddapah and the neighbouring villages. He travelled to Nandyal in Anantapur district where, the night he reached the place he saw a performance by a local company called the Jyothi Subbaiah Company. Jyothi Subbaiah belonged to the 'Kalavanthula' community (a caste professionally engaged in giving performances, especially in temples. That was one of the several local groups that sprang up in entire Andhra after the Dharwada Nataka Companis visit in 1880) and ran a theatre group. The team performed mythological plays. As it contained a larger number females in the cast it was a popular group. The night after the performance was over, Govindappa went to Jyothi Subbaiah, introduced himself as Govinda Rao and as a poor orphan and begged for work. The proprietor pitied the young man and took him as an errand boy.

Govindappa alias Govinda Rao was thrilled with his new environment. As he did earlier when he joined his parents and learnt the art and science of leather puppetry soon, he also learnt the nuances of stage performances – the use of curtains, the entry of character, the way dialogues and songs were delivered, etc. he already knew some of the ragas and learnt a few more. More than anything else, he learnt the art of make-up, the use of ardalam and zinc powder and he soon learnt the art of making ornaments, headgears and wigs. This was Govindappa's real apprenticeship in theatre. Afraid that he might not be retained if he ate his mouthful, Govindappa ate only one meal a day; worked throughout the day and a larger part of the night and soon earned the affection of Jyothi Subbaiah and the entire troupe.

Govindappa was already a multi-faceted artist because of his early exposure to music in puppetry and his expertise in playing the violin and the mridangam. He was made to use these talents when they were needed occasionally (as the troupe had its own violinist and tablist). The most exciting thing for him at Nandyal was his participation in the Company's dramas as an actor. Besides several small roles, he did the role of Viswamitra in *Harischandra* creditably.

Govindappa was in Nandyal for about eight months when his father Venkoji at last found him in the Company, had a fight with the proprietor Jyothi Subbaiah and took him home. The three elder brothers conferred with their mother Chennamma and decided to get him married; which would tie him down to home. The girl was Subbamma (she was in due course called 'Peda Subbamma' when a younger (china) Subbamma came into the family), daughter of Aveti Gangaiah (Kochervu Gangireddy) and Govindamma, his first wife. The family also did not insist that he participated in Bommalata, though it contained to be their main profession and bread-winner.

THE FIRST THEATRE PRODUCTION: “KEECHAKA VADHA”

The beginnings of the Surabhi theatre lay in the year 1885 when a golden opportunity came in the way of the Vanarasa family. In that year an important marriage ceremony was taking place in the house of the local landlords Ayyaparlapati Chenna Reddy and Rami Reddy of the Surabhi Village (earlier known as Sorugu, but later came to be known as Surabhi) and as it was a practice everywhere in Andhra in olden days – asking a Puppet show to present plays. And which puppet team would be called in? Of course, the best in the area – the Vanarasa team – more often called the Ramaiah troupe, for Ramoji, though the youngest of the brothers, was the most enterprising. When the offer was discussed in the house, Govindappa came up with the idea of putting on board a drama, rather than a puppet show. He convinced the elders. But how to go about it?

A puppeteering team transforming itself into a theatre group? How it was possible, asked the three brothers. With his experience both in Puppetry and also in drama recently, Govindappa said it was simple enough:

In a puppet show, it is customary that male puppets are handled by male manipulators and female puppets by females. This would take care of the casting. The male puppeteers who were handling the male puppets and singing the parts and uttering the dialogues of a particular character so would be the case with the female singers. The only difference, as Govindappa explained to his family members, would be that earlier men and women stayed behind a curtain and narrated and performed the roles of the characters, whereas they would now come before the curtain which was being enacted so far behind the curtain. All of them were great singers and testimonies showed that they had an excellent singing and also using their full-throated voices dramatically. The third point he stressed was that all of them knew the text in and out, as everyone was expected to do the chorus lines after the main lines were sung by a particular character.

Govindappa’s uncle, Ramaiah, had a question. Who would wield the musical instruments? If it were behind the curtain, they would need for only two puppeteers to handle the puppets while others were free to play either the violin or mridangam. Govindappa felt his uncle was right. It was better if separate instrumentalists were available. But in the absence of such a facility, they decided that, as in a puppet show, those actors who did not appear on the stage would play the instruments. It was also the case with the Bayalata performances common in the Andhra villages. This fact that they would like to put up a play instead of a puppet show, the Reddy brothers at Surabhi were pleasantly surprised and welcomed the idea and said they would extend all possible help.

The play selected was “Keechaka Vadha”, a popular story from the “Virata Parva” of the Mahabharata. The story was very popular as a puppet show. The play, also titled “Virata Parvam”, was a part of the 18-night performance series by puppeteers, usually allotting one night for each “parva”. Among the Mahabharata stories favoured by the village folk, the top priority also went to Keechaka Vadha, for it had all the elements that would entice the myth-loving people. The fight between a boxer sent secretly by Duryodhana to find out the Pandavas now hiding incognito. It has tantalizing “daruvus” and exciting fights (the fighting in a puppet show is the one most enjoyable!).

It was decided that the cast should include all the performers that would normally participate in every puppet show. The first-ever stage play performed by the Vanarasa

brothers and their family had the cast as follows: Keechaka – Krishnappa; Bheema – Peda Ramaiah; Kanku Bhattu (Dharmaraja in disguise) – Venkaiah; Brihannala – Vazeerappa (Peda Ramaiah's son); Nakula – Govindappa; Sahadeva – China Ramaiah (a foster son of Krishnappa). Among the women, Sairandhri was played by Papabai; Uttara by Chinna Subbamma (Govindappa's younger sister-in-law). There was no mention of who played the role of Sudheshna, King Virata's wife, but in all possibility it must have been taken up by Peda Subbamma, Govindappa's newly-married bride.

Govindappa played a key role in this performance for it was he that visualized it; coordinated the efforts, directed the play, showed the other actors movements, entrances and exits, dialogue delivery, etc. This was possible because of his exposure to and active participation in Jyothi Subbaiah's Company.

The performance became an instantaneous success. People liked it immensely. It was different from what they had been seeing for years. It was also fascinating because people liked it partly because it was new and latest theatrical performance did not yet reach the small towns and villages. They were hardly five years old even elsewhere. So this was a thrilling experience. But it was thrilling even to a man like Chenna Reddy, the village landlord, who was exposed to outside world and had seen quite a bit of the new world's entertainments. He travelled widely and was a regular visitor at the festivals in Hyderabad and at the Royal Durbar at Gadwal. It was fascinating to him firstly because he did not listen to such chase native music from the other theatre groups. Secondly, this was the only group in which women played female roles, unlike in the other teams in which men played female roles. And to add to all, these women did an exceedingly great job in acting as well as in singing.

Thus the first-ever performance of the Vanarasa family was a turning point in their lives.

Several important dignitaries and landlords of the neighbouring villages, who came for the wedding in the Chenna Reddy family, witnessed the play and were greatly pleased. They invited the team to come to their villages to perform the play. Among them was T. N. Govindarajulu Naidu, Sub-magistrate at Pulivendula, a taluk town, who saw the production was greatly impressed. He said that though this was their first production, they did well. He invited them to his town. He also commended the Reddy brothers, who sponsored the play and told them they would do well to keep them in their village and train them in dramatics.

The suggestion was heartening to the brothers because they were also overjoyed by the response and the suggestions given by such an important officer could not easily be denied. Next day the brothers called the family, congratulated them and asked them to stay behind in the village. They reported what the honoured guest the previous evening told them – to keep the team in the village and see that they got better training in dramatic productions. They then asked the Vanarasa family to stay behind in the village. The family gratefully agreed. Since then they stayed back in Surabhi. Surabhi became their home and to acknowledge their gratitude they took an additional family name – Surabhi.

TWO PATRONS AND THREE BROTHERS

In a short introduction to the thin volume of "Testimonials" (published, 1918) given to late Shri V. Ramaiah, Managing Proprietorship of Sree Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta

Nataka Sabha, A. Papabhai, his foster daughter and present proprietrix of the above company, (containing Testimonials from 1894-1913), the two patrons Chemikela Chenna Reddy and his brother-in-law Ayyalapati Rami Reddy said that this team of Aare Marathi performers at the time they settled down at Surabhi at their request contained eight brothers and four sisters, besides brothers-in-law. It was a group of 50 people, all of them actors. They learnt the art while residing at Surabhi. Their original place was Mysore.

These details came from the two patrons themselves and so must be authentic. Though some of the testimonials contained dates of issue, many of them did not. The credits given to the team in general and to some of the actors and the actresses in particular would give us a general idea about the nature and compositions of the first Surabhi theatre group.

A note about the two patrons is imminent at this juncture. Without the active financial support and patronage of Chemikela Chenna Reddy and Ayyaparlapati Remi Reddy, the Surabhi people could not have come of their own. Both of them were landlords, who had connections with the East India Company and British administration. Both of them were cultured and were active in social welfare programmes not only in Surabhi and the neighbouring villages, but also in the district headquarters of Cuddapah. Between the two, Chenna Reddy was known outside the district as well for his poetic gift. He patronized poets, Harikatha exponents and artistes by arranging their programmes in Surabhi. He was a regular invitee at the major 'samsthans' like Gadwal, Karvetinagaram during their annual Durbar Celebrations. He was an acknowledged poet and also a patron of poets which fact was evidenced from his introductions to contemporary anthologies of poems.

Perhaps another reasons that prompted the two Reddys to lending a helping hand to the Surabhi people was the unreserved appreciation of the First Class Magistrate of Cuddapah, Govindarajulu Naidu and his suggestions that these great artistes be helped, trained and be given all possible help. Perhaps the two Reddys wanted to oblige a big official since what he was asking was within their means.

They immediately set things in motion. They gave them sites to build houses. They provided the wherewithal for construction. They also built a building, in later years, for the entire group to stay and also to rehearse. The building, now in a dilapidated condition, shows signs of providing big mirrors in the central hall so that the actors rehearse while looking into the mirrors!

The next two to three years were apprentice days for the group. They were performing the play 'Keechaka Vadha' whenever they found an offer from neighbouring villages. They also continued their puppets shows for they are their main bread winners. It was for sure that Govindappa alone did not participate in these performances. Their fathers also did not force him.

The Vanarasa family that settled at Surabhi mainly comprised of Sanjeeva Rao's sons – Ramaiah, Subbaiah, Veeraiah, Ramaiah (Peda Ramaiah), Krishnaiah, Venkaiah (sons of the first wife), Kondaiah and China Krishnaji (sons of the second wife). The four daughters of the family – Papabhai, Kamalabhai, Anjanamma and Hanumakka – also lived here. Besides, the brother-in-law – the husband of Papabhai, Aveti Gangaiah with his first wife and children lived with the Vanarasa family. There were also a couple of Rekamdar and Sinde families in this group of fifty. They were related to the Vanarasa family or by marrying the daughters of these families to sons of the Vanarasa family. The first three sons did not participate in

puppet shows, though Subbaiah's daughter, Papabhai, who was adopted by the second Ramaiah (Peda Ramaiah), was the prime singer for the trope. During the first phase of initiation, the three brothers – Krishnoji (Krishnaiah), Venkaiah and Peda Ramaiah took the lead.

SURABHI COMES OF AGE: THE AGE OF RAMAIAH

Eversince the puppet families settled at Surabhi in 1889 and were indulged in regular performances of puppetry and occasional performances of drama, their popularity spread over the entire district. One play was not enough. They could convert the other puppet plays into stage plays as they had done in the case of "Keechaka Vadha", but comments by knowledgeable people helped them to look into the immediate needs if they wanted to continue in theatre. Even Chenna Reddy, who saw his own Surabhi people's performance and that of the upcoming new drama, felt that the Surabhi team should gear up to fulfil the new demands. Whenever there was an opportunity, he would take the elders to see any contemporary drama performed in the vicinity. They saw Ramakrishnamacharyulu's "Chitra Naleeyam" in 1887 and his "Vishada Sarangadhara" in 1888. Both the plays belonged to the new genre. Chenna Reddy was particular that their drama should be of that kind. The main difference between the new type of play and the Surabhi's was that the latter was mostly in the mould of a traditional Bayalata, with a lot of singing. Dialogue in prose was meagre and actors moved aimlessly on the stage while one character spoke and sang.

The moment Chenna Reddy and Rami Reddy, on the advice of Govindarajulu Naidu, thought of improving the presentational quality of the Surabhi troupe, they started searching for a good teacher. When one Mr. Rama Rao from Kurnool came to Jammalamadugu to dance along with his troupe, the Reddys approached him. He accepted to stay in Surabhi, train them and present plays. He arrived at Surabhi but within no time he left at place without informing anyone. He probably came to know of his deficiencies as a director to direct plays for the team, which was already well-equipped with knowledge of *ragas* and good dialogue delivery.

Some more months elapsed when finally they found the right man in Raptati Subbadas. Subbadas came to the village to present a "harikatha kalakshepam". His singing prowess was excellent. He was thoroughly knowledgeable about ragas and talas; his expertise in Telugu and Sanskrit was evident in his harikatha performance. He was closely connected with a theatre group in Hindupur, his native town, which was also the native place of Andhra Nataka Pitamaha Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu, whose plays greatly attracted both the actors and their patrons.

It was under the direct supervision of Raptati Subbadas that the Surabhi people's dramatic interest was propelled into a professional obsession. For over an year he wrote plays for them, directed them and also acted in them. Since the Surabhi troupe was popular and its performances were hailed by one and all, the Reddys wanted the plays to be taken to the other places. They now had a director a well-knit dramatic company and three more plays written and directed by Subbadas – *Harischandra*, *Sarangadhara* and *Shakuntalam*, an adaptation of Kalidasa's play – and what all it needed now was a name. Subbadas named it "Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta Nataka Sabha".

The Reddys provided the necessary stage equipment. They also made collapsible stage: it was a pendal, with palmyrah leaves covering the top and thick curtains of clothes made by the lambadas covering the three sides. A raised platform served as the stage. Govinda Rao made the ornaments with glass beads. The Reddys also called two painters from Madras – Venu and Ranganayakulu – for providing painted curtains, new dresses in the mode of the new drama were stitched. Kerosene lusture lights number 14 were provided for the shows, while the first production, *Keechakavadha*, had oil-fed hand-torches lighted the stage. Make-up materials were made of chalk, yellow and red ocheres and black powder collected from the top of the kerosene lamps. These served as the make-up materials.

There was nothing new in the colour combinations since many of the colours were used earlier in the preparation of the puppets. The only difference was that in the earlier days the colours were mixed in oils and applied to the leather puppets, they were mixed with water now to be used as make-up materials. However make-up was a combination of their early experience in puppet making and in modern stage make-up drawn from contemporary theatre practices.

As music is essential part of the Surabhi performances Subbadas transformed the puppet music tradition of the Surabhi people to the traditions of the theatre music. Earlier an arm-bellow wind pipe was used for providing *sruti*. But in its place Subbadas introduced a *tambura*. Harmonium, mridangam and symbols were the other instruments used as the orchestra and were located on the stage in the side wings. Subbadas taught each one of them the theatrical mode of singing which was quite different from the singing in the puppet shows. The raga elaboration in a puppet show synchronized with the chorus. Since there was no chorus in these plays the raga was sung in collaboration with the bhava.

Subbadas was also an actor of merit. When the team not gets ready to take up the major roles of the heroes, he acted as Dushyanta in *Shakuntalam*, as Raja Raja in *Sarangadhara* and as Harischandra in *Harischandra*. But the actors from the group were ready with their roles after elaborated training and strenuous rehearsals he allowed them to play the lead roles, when he acted in less important roles as Kanva, Viswamitra etc. Subbadas also wrote an invocatory song for the Surabhi troupe.

It was a prayer for Vigneshwara in rag kafi in rupaka tala. The prayer “Shri Sailaja Suta... Surabhipura Shri Sarada Manovinodini” had also the signature of Subbadas and the signature was replaced with a general term of adulation, “Vignanivarana”. Subbadas also taught the intricacies of entrances and exits. He even taught them how to tie a sari for stage purposes.

Since the troupe contained excellent singers in Ramaiah and Papabhai and Subbadas, the performances were an instantaneous success. Subbadas included several songs in his plays after the passion of Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu. The importance of music given by the Sabha even in the nomenclature it is a “Sangeeta Nataka Sabha” which emphasizes the word sangeeta (music) as a primary composition of the drama.

After the initial success of the plays in Surabhi, Subbadas and the Reddys ventured a tour of the troupe from Surabhi to Rayachoti. There was a thatched tent constructed by another local theatre group. The Surabhi people took the tent on lease and started performing their plays. It was here in 1890 that Surabhi people initiated the ticket system. Their collection per day was handsome Rs. 100/- which was very big amount. The amount was

divided among the three families of the brothers and their kith and kin equally. But the sharing of the proceeds was only on paper. They lived together, ate together and performed together.

GOVINDA RAO TAKES OVER

From 1889 to 1895, the Sarada Manovinodini Natya Sabha toured within the vicinity of Surabhi. They moved around carefully, doing plays with expertise, but also with economic viability. They went to Jammalamadugu and Rayachoti many times. The troupe's performances had become a great attraction, for this was the only troupe in which women played women's roles. And they were all family women! In all the other troupes including the famous Sabha's of Dharmavaram and Kondubhotla Subrahmanya Sastry, of Guntur First Company and the Masulipatnam National Theatrical Company – only males were donning the female roles. The audience was eager to see how they acted, especially in love scenes.

Secondly the singing capabilities of the Surabhi people were superior to any others popular in contemporary Andhra. Papabhai, China Ramaiah, Anjanappa and Peda Ramaiah gained reputation for their singing. They not only sang the verses well, but their songs were better. People who were exposed to the Parsi theatre performances compared them with Surabhi's and favoured the latter because the Surabhi was a well-knit family unit and so showed greater performance discipline.

The three brothers came back from their short tour where they received unprecedented success. They went to Proddutur, another town nearby where they presented the three plays in their repertoire. "*Harischandra*" was especially popular. Though Subbadas was doing the title role of Harischandra in the initial days, Ramaiah took over the reins now.

Peda Ramaiah, more than anyone else, must be considered the architect of the Surabhi future. With great vision and proper direction, he steered the destinies of the troupe. He measured with caution and pros and cons of each step the company was taking. Besides, his acting potentialities and his ability to endear anyone built up the image of the Company. A testimony to the acumen in acting of all the members in the troupe and especially of Ramaiah's is available in a personal letter Chemikela Chenna Reddy wrote to Peda Ramaiah. Feeling extremely sorry that he could not attend the show at Penugonda. Chenna Reddy wrote, in a moving testimony:

My dear Ramaiah,

Tulasi Reddy conveyed to me the message you wanted him to convey to me on 28-5-1900. In a place where many people know me, if I start crying as I did at Proddutur, my brother-in-law Jonnavaram Konda Reddy might make fun of me for my weak heart. That held me away from coming. When Peda Papamma as Chandramati came running to Harischandra I was drowned in sorrow. When she saw weeping 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 own teacher's.... I am not a very rich man; otherwise I would have bestowed on you all the presents that you could. Your acting, singing and the hard work you had put in – about all these things I would publicise

as much as I could.... The kind of honour that you extend to me when I come to you, makes me feel utterly helpless. As a return to your gracious and generous treatment, I will educate your son Anjaneya (Anjanappa).

I remain,
Ayyaparlapati Chemikela Chenna Reddy

This letter amply testifies to the facts that the performances were *par excellence* and the Reddys, as the other audiences, were very greatly pleased. They helped the Surabhi family not only in providing them what they wanted to make their performances excellent, but also saw to it that they came up in all aspects of life.

When the tours had become inevitable and the Reddys were ready to sponsor them wherever they wanted to go, they needed a youthful spirit to be in-charge of the Programmes, tours arrangement and the general conduct of the performance. It was in this context that Govinda Rao was entrusted with this job. Since 1895 when they started their regular tours, Govinda Rao took over as Manager of Sarada Manovinodini Sabha. Under his aegis the Sabha became more organized; the tours more fruitful. By this time Raptati Subbadas left the company. The three brothers initiated the starting of a theatre troupe with Govinda Rao leading them; the two Reddys providing the troupe whatever it wanted to realize their drams and Subbadas paved the way for their consolidations and progress in terms of their acting prowess and presentational abilities.

At a time when their fame had reached far and wide, two important things took place: one was that Govinda Rao took over as the de facto Manager though (Peda Ramaiah's name still continued to be officially mentioned as the Manager). 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 the 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 the Gubbi Company had shown reminded him of the Parsi companies and he was thoroughly taken in by them. He started working to create a theatrical atmosphere as he has seen in the Parsi plays and couple it with the kind of sane characterization and musical virtuosity as taught by Subbadas.

Soon they bounced as long trip, equipping themselves with new costumes, newly painted curtains and a new electrical lighting system. Besides the three plays – *Harischandra*, *Sarangadhara* and *Sakuntalam* – he requested his elder father Krishnaji to write two plays after the fashion of the Gubbi Company's performances – '*Kanthamati*' and '*Subadhra Kalyanam*'. Both the plays were modelled on the Gubbi plays and were improvised. They became instantaneous success as they provided heart-throbbing tricks.

Kothapally Laxmaiah, who joined Govinda Rao in about 1927 to be his secretary and chief adviser wrote in the 'Saptati Sanchika' (Souvenir published on the 70th Birthday Celebrations) of Govinda Rao that the Sarada Manovinodini was started in 1895 by Govinda Rao. It was not true. The first Company came into existence in 1889 and was christened "Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha" by Subbadas. After he left, the Company came under the supervision of Govinda Rao in 1895 who rechristened it as "Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta Nataka Sabha". The addition 'Sangeeta' was Govinda Rao's idea and since the new emphasis given to music, both in terms of singing poems and songs as well by everyone in the east.

Govinda Rao was also responsible for preparing materials for the construction of a moveable stage and auditorium. The idea of having the Company's own paraphernalia helped quick transportation and ready construction. The company had several men who would be employed in constructing a tent and removing it. The earlier practice of covering the side walls of the auditorium with "lambadi patti's" the thick coloured cloth hand-woven by the lambada women – (a wandering tribe) was now replaced by arranging tin 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.

As time went on and tours had become frequent. Govinda Rao introduced a new system of sharing the process 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 family theatre group. Even when Govinda Rao's sons and daughters established their own Surabhi theatre groups, they are mainly made-up of one nucleus family with supporting families in the immediate kinship circle.

Govinda Rao divided the proceeds into three units. First of all one third of the revenue was ear-marked for "Stage Purposes". This would involve stage equipment, new lights, tin sheets, etc. Another one third would go to the "Emergency expenditure". These would include loss due to cyclonic weather, 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 like wise. 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 in the puppet shows. As and when new technical innovations came his way, Govinda Rao always welcomed them and implemented.

TOURS AND EARLY SUCCESSES: RAMAIAH, CHINA RAMAIAH AND PAPABAI

With five years of solid and successful experiences in touring within the district, the Surabhi theatre scheduled a long programme of touring the entire coastal belt of Andhra. After successful productions in Kurnool and Anantapur districts they performed at Narsaraopet (Guntur District), Guntur, Eluru, Rajahmundry, Vishakhapatnam, Vizianagaram and Barampuram (then in the Madras State and now in Orissa). At each place the troupe stayed for a month and a half to three months and gave performances of the five plays in their repertoire and added plays as and when necessary. At Guntur the elders of the team saw "Sadarama" and "Bhallana Rajane Katha", both performed by the Gubbi Company. On public demand they had to extend their performances. Krishnaji with the help of Govinda Rao improvised the two Kannada plays and performed them at Eluru under the titles "Kantamati" and "Bhallana Raju Charitra".

The troupe was also very sensitive to new theatrical needs. In Narsaraopet they saw a gas light with two burners. China Ramaiah, who was a technical expert immediately, learnt its operation and the troupe provided for themselves a two-bulb gas light. Similarly, in

Guntur they saw a small harmonium used for *sruti*. They ordered it from Madras and started using them. In the rainy season of 1901, the troupe built a tent of their own and staged the six plays. All their performances were an instantaneous success. Chilakamarti Laxminarasimham, a veteran playwright wrote in his Autobiography (Sweeyacharitra) about their visit:

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

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While in Visakhapatnam Marepally Ramachandra Sastry, a great *littérateur*, playwright and the director of a major theatre association, "Sri Kalabhilashaka Samajam" wrote two plays – *Parijatapaharnam* and *Bilhaneeyam* – and the Surabhi troupe performed them in early 1902. Tadakaluri Kuppuswamy, the music director and 'song coach' taught them the songs in Barampura, the group performed *Kantamahti* 22 times on public demand. On their return journey the troupe performed at Srikakulam, Palakonda, Vishakhapatnam, Bandar (Machilipatnam), Bezwada, Warangal and Secunderabad. In Srikakulam, they requested Vajhala Chintamani Sastry, a scholar of eminence to write for them a play called *Chandrakanta*, a favourite play of the Dharwad and Parsi troupes. Both *Kanthamathi* and *Chandrakanta* were great attractions among the plays in their repertoire.

The 1901-02 season and the 1902-03 season were very fruitful not only in terms of successful performances and income generation, but also in terms of gaining the approval and appreciation of scholars and leader of theatre. It also helped Govinda Rao and the Surabhi people to generate new scripts, especially in accordance with the Surabhi people's needs and their actors and technical prowess.

In 1902-03 season, the Surabhi Samajam performed at Machilipatnam for three months and the neighbouring small towns for another three months. Their stay at Machilipatnam was a gain in one way and a tentative loss in another. While they were at Machilipatnam, their *Chandrakantha* and *Kanthamathi* had 22 performance abilities. In a letter in the influential weekly, Krishna Patrika dated 18-06-1903, "a lover of drama" bemoaned that the Machilipatnam's spectator's mad love for Surabhi performances, especially their women doing women's roles and their 'sringara abhinaya' that before long the local theatres would have to go without spectators.

The greatest benefit they accrued during their stay at Machilipatnam was their acquaintance with Kotaiah Devara, a renowned violinist and classical vocalist. Govinda Rao requested Kotaiah Devara to train the youngsters of the troupe in classical music so that they would be better actors. Govinda Rao also felt that this was the only way to come out of the style of the puppet theatre, which still dominated the singing style of the Surabhi group. Kotaiah Devara was also very happy to teach the youngsters. The group left behind Anjaneyulu (known as China Anjanappa, Krishnaji's son, Hanumantha Rao, son of Venkatappa, Aveti Pullaiah, Papabhai's son, Anjanamma, the eldest daughter of Govinda Rao, Bojja Bai, Aveti Venkataswamy's daughter, Peda Anjanappa son of Ramaiah, the eldest son of the family and Peda Anjanamma, first Ramaiah's daughter. All these young boys and

girls stayed at Machilipatnam for 4 years and learnt either vocal or some instrument. Hanumantha Rao became a renowned violinist and Anjaneyulu (China Anjanappa), a master Harmonist.

They also suffered a draw back during this period. For some reason, Peda Ramaiah and his adopted daughter Papabai had developed some misunderstanding with the other brothers. Both of them left the Sarada Manovinodini and joined the Godugupet Dramatic Association and staged some plays with its members. The Surabhi troupe, except these two, performed at Ayyankivari Hall. After a short while Ramaiah and Papabai could not adjust themselves with the Godugupet association and came back to their parent association.

During the 1903-04 season, the Surabhi troupe toured Warangal and Secunderabad and found an unprecedented welcome and success. They staged a series of plays, each play represented twice and even thrice on public demand. To people of Secunderabad who had a taste of the performances of both Gubbi and Parsi Companies liked the Surabhi's better because of the "excellent dramatic acting" and not "merely singing" and "gimmicks". The theatre lovers of Secunderabad honoured every actor and actress in the troupe. They honoured, in a public function, Venkubai, Krishnaji's wife, with the title "Janjhuti Venkubai" for her excellence in rendering this raga, "Janjhuti".

These three seasons gave the Surabhi people a much needed confidence in themselves besides earning for them substantial revenues and unequivocal fame. Guntur was one place where every government official visited the place and gave testimonials regarding the overall excellence of the performances. *Sakuntalam*, *Harischandra* and *Sarangadhara*, were especially praised by connoisseurs with general public, *Chandrakatha* and *Kanthamati* were great hits. General encomiums were received by the Company and the one published in The Madras Standard on 14th June 1901, would testify their popularity:

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 fits 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.B. 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

Several British officials like R.H. Campbell, H.O.B. Hardinge and Indian officials like I. Ghosh, A. Vaidyanath Iyer and Sri Matsyanka Rao who witnessed the Surabhi performances were extravagant in their praises. The Hindu, The Patriot and The Madras Standard paid glowing tribute. In fact the new century ushered in the new Company's adventurous tours.

The tours continued. Govinda Rao saw to it that the big family of seventy members stayed together both by his disciplined supervision and his humane approach. During 1904-05 the Surabhi troupe toured Madras successfully. In Madras they performed for over three months. The next season, 1905-06 saw their tour of Mysore.

Govinda Rao planned his tours in such a way that each one was made memorable either by adding a new play to the repertoire or adding a new technical dimension in performance. Two new plays – *Abhinava Mohana* and *Stree Sahasam* – both based on folklore – were added now to the repertoire. Some plays like *Bilhaneeyam* were withdrawn for they were too “classical” and would not cater to the public taste. In Madras they arranged the harmonium in the “pit” before the proscenium arch and not in the wings (on the stage) as was the practice until then. They added several “tricks scenes” during this time, mainly from the Parsi Companies that toured the South extensively.

The plays that Surabhi theatre staged until now were drawn mainly from mythology. Some of them were based on folk legends. *Harischandra*, *Sakuntalam*, *Subadhraparinayam*, *Lanka Dahanam*, *Rama Anjaneya Yudham*, *Keechaka Vadha*, *Parijatapaharanam* were the mythological plays in their repertoire – *Sarangadhara*, *Kanthamathi*, *Chandrakantha*, *Stree Sahasam* and *Jaganmohana* were based on folk legends and the latter type were modelled on the Parsi or the Gubbi Company's performances.

By 1910 the family became too large and unwieldy. There were nearly 100 people. They were all to act and live together at one place. A separate house was to be rented wherever they stayed. Even during seasons when the performance did not take place, everyone was to be paid. Meanwhile Govinda Rao married Laxamma, another daughter of Aveti Gangaiah in 1908 (his first wife Subbamma also was a daughter of Gangaiah). This was necessitated because Subbamma was not an actress and could not help Govinda Rao on the stage.

Though every Surabhi person, male or female, old or young acted on the stage, some stood out for the excellence in acting and singing. Peda Ramaiah was the best of all. China Ramaiah, an adopted son of Krishnaji was a prolific individual whose multifaceted genius as an actor, painter and musician was a great source of inspiration to all. Govinda Rao's wife Laxamma and China Ramaiah paired as hero and heroine, now that Peda Ramaiah became old. Papabai still was the major attraction for her unparalleled singing. Venkubai, one of Krishnaji's wives were also popular in some plays. Though in the early years painters were brought from Madras to paint the curtains, in later years China Ramaiah learnt the art and he was in charge of the all scenery work.

By 1910 the three brothers – Ramaiah, Venkaiah and Krishnaiah realized that they should now part ways. They also took an oath that they would still practise all family rituals and festivals together. They decided that each one should take as his share a particular area of the Telugu – speaking land. Thus Krishnaji was to perform mainly in Rayalaseema districts and Mysore area; Peda Ramaiah in Telangana districts and Venkaiah in Coastal Andhra. This arrangement was again symptomatic of the Puppeteer’s practice – or, we can say, the folk performer’s practice – of dividing the areas of performance among families.

Though this area division among the three brothers was kept as a sacred oral oath, until 1917, this was not strictly into practice in later years since there were several other families that weaned away from these three that started companied and this rule of three-some division was not mandatory on them.

SURABHI CONSOLIDATES: THE AGE OF GOVINDA RAO

After the trifurcation of the original Surabhi theatre group, Sree Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta Nataka Sabha, the three Vanarasa brothers went their ways. Each one of the brothers was helped and assisted by this kith and kin – especially the other kinship families that came into close contact with them through marital relations. Out of the nine families belonging to the Puppet performers, four came into the field of theatre – the Vanarasa family being the most prominent. The others were the Aveti family, the Rekandar family and the Sindhe family. The last three originally belonged to the Rekandar clan and marriages were done between the Vanarasa and Rekandar clans. Thus the Vanarasa families gave their daughters into the other three families and brought daughters-in-law from the three families. Rarely, outsiders who opted out to come into the family to marry one of the girls (and very rarely sons) of the family left their original family names and adopted one of them suitable to them as per family relationships.

GOVINDA RAO: The Path-Finder

Govindappa or Govinda Rao took over the conducting of the Surabhi Samajaml even in 1895, but his burden further increased when the brothers got divided in 1910. The one person who had moulded the destinies of the Surabhi theatre and the Surabhi people was Govinda Rao, who single-handedly systematized both the organizations and performative branches of Surabhi. His major contributions to the development and consolidations of Surabhi were numerous. He first of all transformed the leather traditions into a theatrical tradition. This total change in the performance modalities brought the Surabhi theatre into the national orbit, along with the Gubbi Company, Rajamanikkam Pillai Company and similar other professional theatres of India. Secondly, he retained and continued the Puppet tradition in making it the only “family professional theatre group” in the entire country. As Gubbi Veeranna, well-known Kannada professional theatre proprietor observed on December 19, 1937 when Govinda Rao’s Seventieth Year Celebrations were held at Ellur that his own company would e wound up with his demise whereas Govinda Rao’s theatre would continue to prosper even after him because it was a family theatre; a hereditary profession. That the Surabhi theatres survived after Govinda Rao and continued to entertain large numbers of audiences was solely due to the farsighted vision of Govinda Rao.

Govinda Rao was singularly responsible to equip 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, Krishnaji Rao and Hanumanta Rao, he strengthened the technical side of performances. Latest lighting equipment including dimmers and lights allowed special lighting effects possible. Even today these “tricks”, mainly based on lighting and design effects are popular. Govinda Rao not only attended shows of the Parsi Companies but consistently made efforts to send 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 of his audiences.

Govinda Rao’s major concern was the reception of a play by his audience. If tastes change 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-dramatist 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 remuneration. Great scholar-poet-playwrights like Marepally Ramachandra Kavi, Vajjhala Chintamani Sastry, Pisapati Chidambara Sastry and above all Malladi Viswanatha Kaviraju and his brother Venkata Krishna Sarma and Kopparapu Subbarao were his playwrights who were always regarded highly in the Company. By thus assimilating several characteristics from different sources, Govinda Rao made the Surabhi Company an ideal one.

Both Peda Ramaiah and Venkaiah (Govinda Rao’s father) called their companies “Sree Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta Nataka Sabha”. As they moved in different directions, there never was a clash of interests. However in 1927 when both the teams were performing in Guntur, a great actor Hari Prasada Rao advised Govinda Rao to retain his identity by renaming his Company. He gave a name also to it: “Sree Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali”. Ramaiah, Papabai and China Ramaiah retained the earlier name “Sree Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta Nataka Sabha”. Peda Ramaiah, accompanied by China Ramaiah and Papabai had a long tour in 1911-12, which culminated ultimately in Rangoon, in 1913.

Ramaiah’s “Sarada Sabha” followed the same track they traversed several times earlier – from Surabhi to Cuddapah, to Guntur, to Rajahmundry, to Barampuram and from there to Rangoon. This was a particularly fruitful trip for the Company. They amassed huge income, and were honoured with titles, gold medals and laudatory welcome addresses. Ramaiah though in his fifties at the time, showed his best-ever acting prowess. Added to this, for the Andhra settlers in Rangoon this was real treat because they always had to be satisfied with Telugu amateur performances or Tamil professional performances. Ramaiah’s planning (much of it he owed to Govinda Rao), China Ramaiah’s excellent acting talent and Papabai’s singing prowess kept the company in high esteem. The sponsors, Abdul Rahman & Company, ship owners from Madras who settled down in Rangoon, were so happy that on the last day of the month and a half long trip, everyone of the actors was given a gold medal!

With the death of Peda Ramaiah in 1914 in Hyderabad, the Company came into the hands of China Ramaiah who ran it, along with Papabai for sometime, until 1935.

GOVINDA RAO AND HIS PROGENY:

Another thoughtful step taken up Govinda Rao was with regard to the marriages of his sons and daughters. He saw to it that each one was trained in dramatics since birth and, in case one was less interested in acting, he was trained in either harmonium or violin or in some cases he even trained some in backstage work. Of course, everyone participated in the play production. Even technicians did small walk-on roles. Children were born in the side wings; women performed a major role and immediately gave birth to a child in his or her mother's arms, then toddling on the stage as a child and then graduate into big roles.

Govinda Rao, Venkoji's adopted son, had virtually paved the way for the resurrection of the puppeteers' lives. Since the Vanarasa family did not know to what 'gothram' they belonged, he adopted the 'Kashyapa gothram'. A firm believer in God and destiny since childhood, he was inclined towards staunch belief. His personal god was Anjaneya at 'Undi'. He fasted every Saturday in honour of the God. He was celebrating Sreerama Navami for nine days. He gave substantial gifts to any Anjaneya temple that he came across in his tours. He would also conduct mass feasts on Sivarathri days in Kotappa Konda, a Saiva pilgrim centre.

Govinda Rao was as worldly-wise as he was devotional. His wisdom mainly rested on improving the quality of the troupe's performances, both in terms of visual beauty and innovative content. He also married Laxamma, another daughter of Aveti Gangaiah in promote and continue the theatrical activity, for his elder wife Subbamma was not proficient in singing.

Govinda Rao's tour itinerary would concentrate mainly a single-directional travel. He kept a destination for the year and covers all the important towns on the way before reaching the destination. Places slightly out of the way and need circuitous travel would be covered in the return journey.

GOVINDA RAO'S TOURS : 1910-1917

Eversince Govinda Rao and his Company was separated from the other two Companies, Govinda Rao increased the number of performances each year. Because of the division one significant change had occurred in the performing tradition of the Surabhi people. Earlier they would tour only major towns now they performed at smaller towns also. Similarly the number of the days the Company stayed at one place had also increased instead of performing every night Govinda Rao initiated a new tradition by performing at alternate nights. This would enable the troupe to rest for a day between performances and so could give their best in the performances. This also gave time for proper publicity. Earlier the Company was staying at a place for 25 to 30 days to do as many number of plays. But now they stayed for almost two months. Govinda Rao also found it convenient to perform for two months at an important town and before moving to another important town camp at a smaller place to have a mini-camp. For example in 1915 the troupe performed at Ramachandrapuram (East Godavari District) during August-September 1915. Before moving to Kakinada, a major port town in the same district, they performed at Jagannadhagiri, 7 miles away from Ramachandrapuram and staged ten plays in twenty days. This was the usual strategy Govinda Rao followed to enable his members to have rest and work alternatively.

A long sojourn like this necessitated having at least 30 plays in their repertoire except some important plays to be repeated at the end of the camp, Govinda Rao constantly kept 25 plays in his repertoire. They included the earlier popular plays like *Lanka Dahanam*, *Chandrakantha*, *Kanthamathi*, *Subadra Parinayam*, *Harischandra* and others but also new editions from time to time. The latest favourites which were added in course of time were *Lava Kusa*, *Sati Savitri*, *Dasavataramulu* and *Sampoorna Bharatam*.

Govinda Rao liberally donated to devotional and educational institutions from the proceeds. In whichever place he performed it was his custom to donate one or two nights' proceeds either to a temple in the local village or to a school. He saw to it that wherever there was a national school, started to teach native subjects and patriotism, he would donate money. As is evidenced from different towns like Kakinada, Tanuku, Vuyyur and Nuzvid. Thus duty and benevolence went hand in hand in Govinda Rao.

Govinda Rao performed all the important roles, but his favourite role was that of Anjaneya in "*Lanka Dahanam*". He was also known for the role of the thief in "*Kanthamathi*". The latter role required several dialects to be used in different situation and Govinda Rao excellent in each one. His observation of human behaviour and speech put him in good stead in such roles.

When the Company was performing at Bhimavaram, on a Saturday, Govinda Rao, already in deep meditation, did the role of Anjaneya. On Saturday s devotees were not supposed to wear new clothes. But as destiny willed it, Govinda Rao put on his newly-stitched Anjaneya dress and went on the stage. Deeply lost in his meditative thoughts, Govinda Rao was singing "Rama.....Rama", without observing that his new clothes caught fire. Before other actors realize it, part of Govinda Rao's body was already was aheady burnt. It took nearly two years for Rao to become near-normal. He vowed that if got back his right hand and could hold a pen, he would fast on Saturday s all through his life. And so he did.

In spite of this debacle, Govinda Rao did not stop the tour. From Bhimavaram, the Company moved on to Attili, a neighbouring town. Laxamma was then pregnant. They were traveling in two country boats. Laxamma had several labour pains. She gave birth to Purnima on 01-03-1918, who was to become famous as an actress both on the stage and the screen in later years.

Govinda Rao stopped doing major roles. They were now being taken by China Ramaiah, who joined the Company after his return from Rangoon and soon after Peda Ramaiah did in 1914. Laxamma was the heroine. However, he reserved for himself the role of the thief in "*Kanthamathi*" which brought him recognition. There would be special mention in advertisement that the Company Manager would be "the thief in tonight's performance". Besides, Govinda Rao also narrated humourous episodes – "Comic interludes" as they were called long intervals.

While in Bhimavaram Govinda Rao got into contact with a young teacher with an aesthetic bent of mind, himself being an actor and a dreamer. He was Kothapally Laxmaiah he was to steer the destinies of many an important undertakings in the life of Govinda Rao in later years.

Like any one in a touring team, Govinda Rao also did not have a permanent home until now. They went back to Surabhi all these days. But when areas were divided among the

brothers, Venkoji and his son Govinda Rao could not go back every time after the closure of a camp because it was far away. Besides, Govinda Rao wanted to settle down at a place in the coastal belt of Andhra Pradesh, which was their main area of operation. When he casually mentioned that he wanted to settle down in these parts to Kothapally Laxmaiah, who belonged to the area, Laxmaiah took time to brood over. At last he suggested that among the villages around, he liked his maternal uncle's village, about 22 kms. away from Eluru, the district centre, called Polasanipalli.

In spite of ill health, Govinda Rao hastened to visit the village. He immediately liked it and wanted to construct a house and move his family. Polasanipalli was a small village of about 800 houses. It had all the calmness of a village, but all the inconveniences of an undeveloped village. There is a big village nearby, Bhimadole, a ceramic works centre. The village originally was called Poolasanipalle (palle - village; poolasani – the flower-maiden). A certain courtesan of the Pangidi Zamindar was called "Poolasani". It would be her name, but it could better be a nick name for she was a "sani" (a 'vesya' – courtesan) who loved flowers. The village was once a bed of flowers and mango groves. By the side of a Shiva temple towards the South of the village there was still a mango grove and Govinda Rao bought half acre of land in 1918 and constructed a house there. He moved into the new house on May 8, 1918.

Govinda Rao found that the people 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 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 Somasundaram, Laxmaiah's eldest brother, as its teacher. He was so broad-minded that he admitted Harijan boys into the school after convincing the orthodox Brahmin elders. Finding that the area was draught-prone, he got fifty wells dug throughout the area. People of the village even today acknowledge Govinda Rao's concern of the villagers and remember him with gratitude. He also constructed a chowtry for the devotees, as the village was on the way from Eluru to Dwaraka Tirumala, popularly called the "Southern Dwaraka".

Govinda Rao's munificence knew no bounds. As he improved the quality of the performances of his plays he had more income. With more income he spent money for several 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 circumstances. He celebrated the marriages of poor couples, many times donning the role of a bride's father. He helped the freedom fighters and also gave donations to the British government during the war years. Constructing a vigil on continued 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) in the art of the theatre and encouraging them to start their own theatre units was his contribution. Spending the 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 very well off he could not withhold his habit of donating his mite for a good cause.

Govinda Rao's Life 1919-1937:

This period may be considered as the golden age in Surabhi history in general and in Govinda Rao's life in particular. In 1919 Govinda Rao built a house at Polasanipalli and started staying there. His first wife Subbamma would stay there looking after the school-going children and pregnant women. She liked this role better than even moving tours and nightly performances. Laxmamma was active on the stage and took up all important roles in the plays. In 1919 itself China Ramaiah, Krishnaji's foster son, joined Govinda Rao. They stayed together until 1927 when China Ramaiah and Papabai revived their "Sree Sarada Manovinodini Sangeetha Nataka Sabha" and Govinda Rao played under a new name – "Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali". The new name was suggested by a veteran actor and Andhra Nata Pitamaha, Hari Prasada Rao. Govinda Rao immediately accepted the suggestion.

Two persons were prominent in Govinda Rao's life. One was Vanarasa China Ramaiah, a cousin of Govinda Rao who was with him from 1914 to 1927. The other one was Kothapally Laxmaiah, his acquaintance since 1917 and his secretary, adviser and life-long friend, philosopher and guide since 1927.

Vanarasa China Ramaiah:

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 Cuddapah district. He belonged to the weaver's community. Krishnaji's wife Namma 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 Ramaiah, this boy was called China (young) Ramaiah.

China Ramaiah started his theatrical life by doing small roles like Lohitasya and then female roles like Satyabhama, Kalahakanthi 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, Yama, Krurasena – and the thief in *Kanthamathi*. According to contemporary accounts, he was considered a great actor, equally felicitous in rajasa and tamasa roles.

China Ramaiah was adept in handling technical equipment. In 1924, at his instance, Govinda Rao bought the first dynamo for his company and China Ramaiah operated it and taught the technique of operations to other backstage people. In 1920 China Ramaiah saw a full-fledged hall made of tin sheets, when the Baliwala Company toured Andhra and performed at Kakinada and Rajahmundry.

Another important area in which both the brothers – Govinda Rao and China Ramaiah operated together was in selecting and commissioning playwrights to write plays exclusively for them. The playwright was selected by both and Govinda Rao allowed China Ramaiah to sit with him and complete the play. Ramaiah also helped to conduct the rehearsals with the author supervising. Thus they inducted Malladi Viswanatha Kaviji, Chakravadhanula Manikyasarma and Pandita K. Subrahmanya Sastry. They also requested Bulusu Sitarama Sastry to write a play, "Dasavatharamulu", the first such play to be written and performed in

South India. Varadachary's "Vishnu Leelalu" and Kannaiah Company's 'Dasavatara' came much later.

As a man China Ramaiah was a gentleman who tried to build up his brother's Company on new technology. As an actor Ramaiah was considered an all-rounder. At his request Viswanatha Kaviraju translated Mrichakatika as "Vasantasena" in which he did the role of Sakara to the astonishment of everyone. Thus the multi-faceted actor China Ramaiah strengthened Govinda Rao's Company when in 1927 China Ramaiah left his brother to start his own theatre company. Govinda Rao like the idea and allowed him to use the name of the Surabhi's original name "Sree Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta Nataka Sabha". Though they parted ways, there was always such amiability between a need arose.

When in 1938 China Ramaiah wound up his Company, he sold the tin tent and the equipment to Baba Rao's Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali. It was China Ramaiah that painted the front curtains (called "ankam") for almost all the Surabhi Companies.

Kothapally Laxmaiah:

Born in 1899 at Bhimavaram to Sangamma and Gurumurthy, Laxmaiah had his early education in Bhimavaram and worked as a teacher in Government for sometime and later as a clerk in the office of Inspector of Schools. Even while in school he acted in plays and wrote two plays for children when he was in Government service. He came into contact with Govinda Rao in 1918 and was to some extent responsible for his settling down at Polasanipalli. In 1927 he resigned his job and at the invitation of Govinda Rao and joined him as secretary. He was with his mentor until he passed away on Oct 4, 1948.

Laxmaiah was also a noted actor. He acted as Bussey in "*Bobbili Yudham*", a historical play, as Bhairava Sastry in "*Mahananda*", a play by Viswanatha Kaviraju and 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.

Laxmaiah was a P.R.O. 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 and the Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad:

If Govinda Rao single-handedly brought a thorough transformation in the thinking and working methods of the puppet families by ushering in theatrical activity as the core profession of his clan people, he was to a large extent instrumental in founding an apex theatre organization called the Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad (ANKP) in 1929. 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. Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad was founded just for that reason.

The man who inspired Govinda Rao to initiate plans to bring various sections of theatre practitioners was Viswanatha Kaviraju, a teacher of Sanskrit and Telugu at Srikakulam and later at Vizianagaram, who came into contact with Govinda Rao in 1910. Even by 1913 he held a consortium of playwrights, actors, critics and other theatre enthusiasts at Polaki, his native village in Srikakulam district. The need for such a platform had strongly worked when, in 1929, Govinda Rao requested Kaviraju to visit Tenali, where he was camping to have discussions on a new play for his company. Kaviraju impressed upon Govinda Rao and Laxmaiah the need for such a colloquium. Govinda Rao started preparations.

The colloquium finally took place on June 19, 20 and 21, 1929 at Tenali in the camp tent of Sree Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali. A committee headed by Govinda Rao supervised the arrangements with Kaviraju 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 and critic, Achanta Venkataraya Sankhyayana Sarma of Vizianagaram, Kasinadhuni Nageswara Rao, editor of the prestigious Telugu daily, "Andhra Patrika", from Madras and scores of others stressed the need of such colloquiums 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".

Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad ushered in a turning point in the history and development of Telugu theatre. It was not merely 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 and other belonged to the commercially viable professional theatre tradition that was prevalent in Andhra at the time, they 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 3rd session of Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad was held in 1932 at Madras he not presided over the prestigious session but also bore the entire expenditure of the conference as he did for the first conference at Tenali.

Three Important Tours:

After the successful conduct of Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad in 1929 Govinda Rao embarked on tours which brought him both money and fame. His Company performed earlier in Madras but in December 1929 he planned a long-term tour covering Madras and Burma (Rangoon). Though he did not accompany the first tour of the Surabhi people under Peda Ramaiah to Rangoon, he knew that it would be a fruitful excersize.

Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali staged six plays at the Victoria Town Hall in Madras before they started for Burma. Their schedule ran as follows:

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

All the plays were instantaneous successes. Everyone interested in drama crowded to see the plays in Madras. 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, Zamindars and connoisseurs of art in Madras showed praises and gifts on the members of the Company. They unanimously congratulated Govinda Rao for his efforts to present plays of very high calibre.

From Madras the Company travelled to Rangoon, the capital city of then Burma ('Myanmar' today) 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, undertaken to sponsor fifteen plays. The Company would stay for month and perform plays on all the days except Tuesday s and Saturdays. They travelled from Madras in two ships – "Ellanpura" and "Ethiopia". A 52-member team started on January 3rd and reached Rangoon on 7th. It 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 Venkata Reddy, a wealthy Telugu gentleman come to their rescue and the team was well settled.

The staging of the plays started on 12th January. The plays performed were: *Harischandra, Kanakatarra, Sati Savitri, Sati Anasuya, Kumara Vijayam, Kusalava, Dasavataramulu, Srikrishna Leelalu, Ravanacharyalu, Sampoorna Ramayanam, Sampoorna Mahabharatam, Mahananda, Kanthamati, Bobbili Yudham* and *Jaganmohana*. The plays were received with great enthusiasm. A public function was held by the "Surangi Rajat", the king of Burma to honour Govinda Rao and the members of the Company.

Another important tour was undertaken by Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali in 1933 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 were virtually retained 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 he wrote for them "Stree Samrajyam", the first ever social play performed by a Surabhi Company. Laxmamma who was still active insisted that she should be given the lead role or woman who demanded liberty. She did the role very creditably, as reports of the time indicate.

The Company visited the erstwhile Nizam State when they were invited to present plays on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee Celebrations of Nawab Mair Alikhan's succession to the throne in 1935.

Saptati Mahotsavam (Seventy Years Celebrations):

All theatre lovers of Andhra celebrated the Saptati Mahotsava of Govinda Rao on 19th and 20th of December, 1937 at Eluru when a grand function was arrived. On 19th Govinda Rao was blessed by a team 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 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's Proprietor from Karnataka – G.H. Veeranna (Gubbi Veeranna), of the Chenna Basaveswara Kripa Poshita Nataka Sangha at the Yuvajana Hindu Sangham.

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 modern theatre movement in Andhra in the form of 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 tribute 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.

The Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad held its annual conference on this occasion in Eluru on December 18, 19 and 20, 1937 and it was 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. Ankala Venkata Subba Rao presented him his latest painting, “Mohini”.

Govinda Rao was taken in a procession on a decked elephant, with Mote Ganga Raju, Viswanatha Kaviraju, Gubbi Veeranna, and other luminaries followed the procession. Among poets who sang in praise of the Surabhi founder were Neelamraju Venkata Seshaiyah, Pamarti Venkateswara Rao, Katta Achaiah, Kothapalli Sundararamaiah, Janamanchi Venkata Subrahmanya Sarma, Nandiraju Chalapati Rao and Vutukuri Satyanarayana Rao. 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 and a one-man theatre 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.

THE FIRST GENERATION THEATRE COMPANIES

Sanjeeva Rao, the founder of the Surabhi theatre clan, had six sons and one daughter. The first three did not opt for either Puppetry or, later, theatre as their profession (though some of their children came into the theatre tradition later). Though the first Ramaiah, Subbaiah and Veeraiah did not find theatre as their way of life, they did not object to their children opting for it.

1. “First Ramaiah’s Family:

The first Ramaiah (not Peda Ramaiah, the sixth son) the eldest son of Sanjeeva Rao, had 4 sons and a daughter – Vazir Rao, Veeraiah, Hanumantha Rao, Rangappa and Ramanujamma. The eldest son Vazir Rao maintained a company for some time. He died in 1955. His son V. Ramaiah (or Ramanna) was the proprietor of Laxmi Prasanna Natya Mandali. Ramanna played villains’ roles. His sister Subbamma and her husband Rekandar Venkateswara Rao played the lead roles.

Ramaiah’s only daughter, Ramanujamma, married Aveti Venkataswamy, son of Aveti Gangaiah through his second wife Govindamma.

2. Subbaiah's Family:

Subbaiah had one son, Ramachandra Rao and two daughters – Peda Papabai and China Papabai. Peda Papabai is the famous Surabhi Papabai who was Peda Ramaiah adopted daughter. A prolific singer and a recognized actress she was the main actress since the Puppetry days and took the heroine's roles in all Surabhi plays in the first company – Sarada Manovinodini Sabha. She won laurels for her performances. She accompanied Peda Ramaiah to Rangoon and other places. After the death of Peda Ramaiah in 1914, she was in charge of the Company when thereafter China Ramaiah took it over.

China Papabai was the second wife of Aveti Venkataswamy.

3. Veerappa's Family:

Veerappa or Veeraiah, the third son of Sanjeeva Rao had three sons – Kesappa, Pullaiah and Anjanappa. Pullaiah and Anjanappa maintained a Samajam for sometime.

4. Krishnaji's Family:

The fourth in the family, Krishnaji has four wives – Narasamma, Sivamma, Venkamma and Venkubai. He had a son Laxmaiah by his first wife, Narasamma, Anjanappa by his second wife Sivamma and Hanumantha Rao and Kamala Bai by Venkamma. Like his three elder brothers, Krishnaji also did not seem to have participated in dramas, but as at least one record shows he was mentioned as the Manager of the Sarada Manovinodini in one of its early sojourns in Cuddapah district.

It was Krishnaji that adopted China Ramaiah and groomed him into theatre. Krishnaji passed away in 1916. His fourth wife was the famous actress Jhanjhuti Venkubai who was given the title "Jhanjhuti" at Secunderabad as she was adept in singing the Jhanjuti raga with great aplomb. She also managed a Sabha called "Venkubai Surabhi Nataka Samajam".

China Ramaiah, who was with Peda Ramaiah in the early days of Sarada Manovinodini Sabha until 1914, joined Govinda Rao and helped the Sabha to attain its heights of fame. From 1927 to 1940 he was in charge of Sarada Manovinodini when Govinda Rao had started his Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali. China Ramaiah's 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.

Krishnaji's daughter Kamala Bai is the famous Cinema star of yester years, Surabhi Kamala Bai. She was the heroine in the first Telugu talkie, "Bhakta Prahlada", having acted as Leelavathi. Even the role of Prahlada was played by Krishnaji from the Surabhi family.

5. Venkoji's Family:

In the beginning days of Sarada Manovinodini Sabha Venkoji played all leading role. In fact he played Keechaka in *Keechakavadha*, the first play performed by the Surabhi

people. He played Dushyanta, Harischandra and Raja Raja Narendra – all important roles. But he died early, in the year 1924.

Venkoji had four wives. By his first wife Chennamma he had a son and a daughter – Hanumantha Rao and Ammayamma. His second wife Sunkamma had a daughter, Anjanamma. It was Sunkamma that adopted Govinda Rao as a son. His third and fourth wives, Chinna Subbamma and Ramanujamma had no children.

After Venkoji's death, China Subbamma managed a theatre from 1924 to 1940. She was known for her royal characters. Chennamma's son Hanumantha Rao was called "Fidelu Hanumantha Rao" for he was an excellent violin ('fidelu' in Telugu), having learnt the art from Kotaiah Devara of Machilipatnam. Ammayamma and her husband Rekandar Ramakrishna Rao had a son, China Venkata Rao, who founded the Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali in 1933. His sister Sarada Bai and his wife Ammayamma played leading roles. His brother-in-law, Tulasi Rao played the lead male roles.

The story of Venkoji's adopted son, Govinda Rao, will be dealt with separately for it is through this family mainly that the name Surabhi had spread far and wide.

6. Peda Ramaiah's Family:

The sixth son Peda Ramaiah was the leader in the first generation. He saw reason in what Govinda Rao was saying with regard to the change of their profession. When once they shifted their priorities, Ramaiah was in the forefront donning major roles. He was a great go-getter; a great P.R. man for the newly-constituted Sarada Manovinodini Sabha. It was said that he could do any role, with equal felicity. For example in the play "*Sarangadhara*" he played the role of Raja Raja Narendra, the king, throughout the play and in the last scene appeared as a "Talari" who was allotted the job cutting Sarangadhara's head – both roles with the same seriousness.

His wife Rama Bai started a company after Ramaiah died in 1914 and continued it until 1937. Papa Bai, who was Peda Ramaiah's adopted daughter took over "Sree Sarada" Sabha after his death in 1914 and ran it upto 1928.

Ramaiah had two sons – Anjanappa and Shyamala Rao who ran a company until 1930 when their brother-in-law Rekandar Sambhulingam took it over.

7. Aveti Gangaiah's Family:

From among the first generation families, mention must be made of Aveti Gangaiah's family. Gangaiah was not himself a theatre man, but his wife Papabai, to marry whom he changed his caste and his name, was a great performer, organizer and singer. Even at the age of 8, she was credited with a "sonorous voice and lovable singing".

Gangaiah (Kochervu Gangi Reddy) had four wives. His eldest Papabi had son, Pullaiah who, by himself and through his children made rich contribution to the development of the Surabhi tradition.

His second wife was Govindamma whose son Venkataswamy was a well-known comic actor. Venkataswamy's progeny through his three wives also started companies and brought laurels to Surabhi.

Venkatswamy's first wife was Ramanujulamm, daughter of the first Ramaiah. Her sons Prasada Rao and Chalapati Rao raised companies on their own and together. By his second wife, China Papamma (Subbaiah's daughter) he had two sons – Pichaiah and Ganapathi Rao. His third wife, Anjanamma was the daughter of Peda Ramaiah. She had two sons – Ramaiah and Nageswara Rao, both of them Govinda Rao's sons-in-law.

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

The intra-sect marriages among puppeteers and, as an extension, among Surabhi people was inevitable since they were migrants and would not give or take children from native local families easily. Secondly there were a limited number of families that had a common heritage and tradition. That explains why such frequent intra-sect marriages were done.

The most prolific among the Surabhi people was Govinda Rao who reared a big family as he reared the contemporary theatre. The story of his family is the story, in a way, of Surabhi's story of consolidation and also of its branching off.

SURABHI BRACHES OFF

During the first generation Surabhi, the only family theatre company was Sree Sarada Manovinodini Sabha, started by the last three brothers of Sanjeeva Rao, initiated and inspired by Govinda Rao and directed, in its early year of consolidation by Subba Das and aided by such stalwart actors and actresses like Ramaiah, China Ramaiah and Papabi. From 1889 to 1927, it moved on from success to more success in the guidance of Govinda Rao.

In 1927, as the families grew and new inclinations for starting another theatre company were perceptible, Govinda Rao, following a suggestion of a theatre savant, Hari Prasada Rao, rechristened his company as Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali. The name "Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta Natya Sabha" was then taken by China Ramaiah and he ran the company for sometime. In the thirties, however, Govinda Rao's sons and daughters, all trained in theatre activities, started their own companies, thus enlarging the area of operation and extending the professional theatre possibilities to its logical end.

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 his progeny. 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 know only that theatrical work for which they were groomed and nothing else. And, since children, they were groomed to be actors, backstage people, their own make-up and costume professional and became tolerably proficient in all the jobs from gate-keeping and drawing curtain to performing the most difficult role. Every Surabhi man is

a jack of all trades, but master of at least one. We have to understand the expansion of the Surabhi tribe from the point of view of and innate environment created 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 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 talkies in 30's most of the well-known actors migrated to the new and rich pastures of cinema. Since the central figures discarded the group's activities for personal gains, the less-talented were left as orphans. It was at this stage that middlemen who were 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 for performance at some place 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 each one sang to his or her throat's fill, throwing drama into the gutter.

In short, Telugu drama and theatre was in a chaos. No doubt, there was the new genre of realistic prose play that was slowly in the offing, the traditional musical drama on which generations of Telugu audiences were fed had become skeletal and directionless. Govinda Rao though that his kind of professional drama with a commercial outlook, would fill in this void. Scholars and critics praised it literary-worthiness and stage worthiness alike. Special authors were commissioned to write plays which would entertain the class and the mass, the urbanites and the ruralites. It had all the ingredients of make-believe. Added to tall these were the stage "tricks" in which they were adept. He also know that the groomed his sons and daughters in this "wholesome theatre activity" and there was no going back on it.

So, he leaped into action. Child after child got training, was married and started its own Company. Modalities were never different. The same code of conduct; the same discipline; the same performance schedule. People at the helm of affairs changed. People obeying the diktats changed. The show went on.

Govinda Rao's Progeny:

Govinda Rao had two wives – Peda Subbamma and Laxmibai. Both were Aveti Gangaiah's daughters. Peda Subbamma had three sons and five daughters. The eldest was Hanumantha Rao, who became a Municipal engineer in Vizianagaram. His two brothers Subba Rao and Koteswara Rao together inherited the Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali when Govinda Rao retired from active work in 1943. Subba Rao and his wife Narayanamma played the lead roles. Koteswara Rao was a painter.

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 Balabai 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 Averi Venkataswamy.

Pullaiah and Dhanalaxmi Devi had five sons and a daughter – Srikrishna Babu Rao, Prakasa Rao, Chandra Rao, Leela Paparao and Krishna Prasad. Surabhi Balasaraswathi, the renowned film actress was one of their daughters: Pullaiah and Dhanalaxmi founded Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali from 1948 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. Chandra Rao, who raised his own company in later years, played villain's roles. 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 Shiridi Sai Baba have received deserving accolades. Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali's *Kurukshetra*, *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" started along with Aveti Ramaiah, his brother and Aveti Poornima, his sister-in-law staged some new plays and were long remembered. In the early years Poornima, a noteworthy actress, whose career outside the Surabhi theatres is better recognized, played the lead heroine. Later, Nageswara Rao's wife, Chellayamma handled the roles with credit. Nageswara Rao's sister, Janaki, also was 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 the Surabhi practiced. He insisted that they should rehearse each play every time it was performed, though that might have already been performed several hundreds of time. He also modernized the costume patterned and ornamentation reduced the 'raga' elaboration to a reasonable limit.

Nageswara Rao was also responsible for commissioning new plays for his company. His "*Vasantasena*", adopted from '*Mrichakatika*' by Malladi Venkatakrishna Sarma was praised by scholars as a memorable work. His son Manohar, who was good actor, ran the company for sometime after his father's death. Manohar also died on untimely death.

Nageswara Rao's commendable work in organizing a consortium of 36 associations will be long remembered by his people. He established "Surabhi Natya 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 Sangham. He also organized the Saptati Mahotsavam of the founding of Surabhi in 1956 on a grand scale.

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

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

Their eldest daughter Subhadramma was a versatile person who did both male and female roles with equal felicity founded a company along with her husband, Rekandar China Venkata Rao. This company, Sri Venkateswara Surabhi Natya Mandali, started in 1933, is today the leading Surabhi Company and is run under the management of Rekandar Nageswara Rao, popularly called Babji. He is ably assisted by her two elder brothers,

Dasarathi Rao and Bhoja Raju. Dasarathi Rao is the company's harmonist and Bhoja Raju played villainous roles. Bhoja Raju also was adept in the company's 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 being 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 *Kurukshetram*, *Lava Kusa*, *Sampoorna Ramayanam*, *Maya Bazar*, *Sati Anasuya*, *Satya Harischandra* and *Balanagamma*, besides *Basti Devata Yallamma*, *Bheeshma*.

Laxamma's second daughter Poornima married Aveti Ramaiah. 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 Theatre of Aveti Nageswara Rao, her brother-in-law, but left that too to become a free-lance actress. With 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 well-known roles with understanding and so was for long a popular actress on the stage. She had also acquired herself well in the cinema world.

The third daughter Santhamma or Santhakumari married Aveti Prasada Rao. Prasada Rao and his brother Chalapati Rao, who married Nagalaxmi, fourth daughter of Govinda Rao and Laxamma later, during the days of their children they started Gajapathi Natyamandali which had a lively tenure of around twenty years. 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.

Nagalaxmi, the fourth daughter, her husband, Aveti Chalapathi Rao started "Sri Govardhana Natya Mandali" in 1943. Their children are now managing it. It is yet another company that is still active.

Shanmukhamma (she changed her name to Vasundhara Devi after marriage), the last daughter of Govinda Rao and Laxmi Bai 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 about 15 years. What was one Samajam when it started and two by 1927, the companies branched off into 36 by 1956 when the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham, the apex body to coordinate the workshop of all Surabhi Companies was formed?

THEATRE AS HEREDITY PROFESSION:

The sudden spurt in numbers was not an accident; nor the reason for such proliferation difficult to presume. Firstly, the children, especially the daughters of Govinda Rao were well-trained, disciplined, meritorious actresses who were brought on to the stage

since their birth. 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 rarely as actors.

The second reason for such a rapid expansion was that the times between 1928 – 1950 augured well for any well-knit, organized traditional theatre company because theatre outside, especially the professional theatre, was virtually in a chaos. Contractors, who ruled the roost, introduced unhealthy practices. Elaborate and many times, undramatic singing, people 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 croonies 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 characters, single-minded devotion, one person-one character equation, minimum but 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. The same reason as to why the Aare people marry within their own small community under the community consciousness. So several members of the families close to the core 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.

TEN MAJOR THEATRE COMPANIES:

By 1956, 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. By that time there were 36 Surabhi associations, major or minor, that were affiliated to the apex organization, Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham. Rekandar Venkata Rao was its president and Aveti Nageswara Rao, its secretary.

According to their own norms, a major Surabhi theatre is one which has its own complete stage and tent materials, complete lighting and costume materials, their own curtains and backstage equipment. They must have personal 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.

Minor theatre will have fewer numbers of plays in their repertoire, say two or three, and they borrow actors from the nearby companies of their own kith and kin. They will also borrow sets and lighting equipment if need be. Since many Surabhi plays have common scripts specially written for them by commissioned playwrights, it will not be usually difficult for artists to perform anywhere. 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 closer to another company except for facial reasons. A minor company usually preferred to perform nearer to a major company since it nearly depended on the major company performing nearby.

The history of the major ten companies in 1956 is in fact the history of the Surabhi theatres at the height of its popularity.

1. Sri Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali (Surabhi):

Started by Vanarasa Govinda Rao in 1927 this was the first independent company that branched off from the original composite company, Sri Sarada Manovinodini Nataka Sabha. Run on ideal lines, it set a model for all the other Surabhi Companies. While Laxmamma, Govinda Rao's second wife and an actress of merit was active, she was taking the lead female roles. In the earlier days Govinda Rao himself was donning the major roles. Afterwards, a versatile actor T. Koteswara Rao from Chirala was inducted into the Company to do lead male roles, after China Ramaiah left the Company to continue with "Sri Sarada".

After the Saptati Mahotsava in 1937 Govinda Rao messed 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 what came naturally to him or her. The training period was perhaps help to create the next generation of theatre activists.

Subba Rao, Govinda Rao's second son, took over the reins of the company and established himself as an able manager and versatile actor. His performances as Kalidasa in "Kalidas" written by Viswanatha Kaviraju and the Mad King in *Mahananda* another play written by Kaviraju and as Marathi in 'Balanagamma' and Alexander in the play 'Alexander', the last two plays written by Malladi Venkatakrishna Sarma. His wife Satyanarayanamma played the leading female roles. Subba Rao's brother Koteswara Rao played humourous 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 new plays besides performing all the old plays that made Surabhi very popular.

This theatre company was the foremost in 50's and 60's with an emphasis on acting, sceneries and costumes as well as a tin theatre which would be sufficient for 1500 people to sit.

2. Sri Sarada Manovinodini Natya Kala Mandali (Surabhi):

This original Surabhi Company Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta Nataka 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 second son Abbaji Rao took over the reins along with his brother Uttam Rao. When Abbaji took it over 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*, *Krishnaleela* and other prominent Surabhi plays of yester years formed the repertoire of this company. It has 60 members and is well equipped technically.

3. Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali (Surabhi):

Founded by Smt. Dhanalaxmi Bai, daughter of Shri Govinda Rao, and Bharata Natyopadhyaya Aveti Pullaiah, son of Smt. Papa Bai the first known Telugu actress on the stage in 1935, 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 brought it as one of the front ranking Surabhi Companies. The brothers were together quite sometime before each one had started his own company.

Baba Rao is a recognized harmonist of great caliber besides being an actor. He is at his best as Arjuna in *Kurukshetram*, Balarama in *Maya Bazar* and Ravana in *Bhookailas*. He is presently the president of the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham. Next to him was S.A. Prakash or Prakasha Rao was a highly talented actor who was honoured for his virtuosity in acting by several cultural organization all over Andhra. His memorable roles included Sri Krishna in *Kurukshetram*, Harischandra in the play of same title and as Narada in *Sati Anasuya*. Chandra Rao was a well-known mechanic and electrician 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 music-director and has also acted in comic roles. Veera Bahu in *Harischandra*, Laxmana Kumara in *Maya Bazar* and Uttara Kumara in *Kurukshetra* were his favourite roles. In later years however, he got a name for his portrayal of the role of Shiridi Sai Baba.

Among the women of this Surabhi Company, Dhanalaxmi Bai herself was an actress who had acted both male and female roles with equal poise. Baba Rao's wife Koteswari, Shakuntala wife of Prakasha Rao played the lead roles for a long time. Sakuntala was also honoured with the title 'Gana Kokila'. The Company had a strength of 70 members and they performed all the major Surabhi plays drawn from mythology and folklore including *Kurukshetram*, *Maya Bazar*, *Bhookailas*, *Balanagamma*, *Deva Das*, *Guna Sundarikatha* and *Harischandra*. *Kurukshetram*, *Bhookailas* and *Guna Sundarikaatha* were specially written for this company by Viswanatha Kaviraju and his brother Malladi Venkatakrishna Sarma.

4. Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali (Surabhi):

This Company was started in 1933 by Rekandar Peda Venkata Rao, a nephew of Govinda Rao, and was later taken over 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 Laxmamma was an actress of great potentialities and acted with equal felicity both male and female roles. She was also good at training her company members both in acting and in stage management. She had also sung for many gramophone companies both classical and theatrical songs. She was honoured by the Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad. China Venkata Rao acclaimed himself 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 Rekandar Nageswara Rao (Babji), the youngest son. Dasarathi Rao is a noted harmonist and also is good in comic roles. Bhoja Raju did all the

major roles besides being a good costume designer and backstage expert. Nageswara Rao is a specialized in the roles of Rama and Krishna in *Lava Kusa* and *Srikrishna Leelalu*. Chaya Devi wife of Dasarathi Rao and Anasuya Devi wife of Bhoja Raju played 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 70 members. *Kurukshetram*, *Balanagamma*, *Gangavatharanam*, *Sati Anasuya*, *Srikrishna Leelalu* and *Lava Kusa* are some of the mythological plays in the company's repertoire and *Krishna Veni* and *Miss. Prema B.A.* are the two social plays performed by them. They are also adept in performing historical plays like *Bobbili Yudham*.

This Company had the unique fortune of being trained by B. V. Karanth, a noted theatre personality in India.

5. New Poornananda Dramatic Theatre (Surabhi):

This company was started by Aveti Venkataswamy and was soon taken over by his son Aveti Nageswara Rao, an actor of great merit in 1943. Honoured by several organization all over Andhra, Nageswara Rao made his company one of the foremost theatre organizations in the state. He equipped his company with modern and the latest gadgets trained his actors vigorously and so the company was one of the leading ones for over 40 years.

Nageswara Rao was a character actor donning roles which demanded varying sentiments. His role of Narada in *Sati Anasuya* and Shakara in *Vasantasena* were considered his best. For sometime his elder sister-in-law, Poornima a renowned actress played in his company. Later his wife Chellayamma, daughter of Govinda Rao, portrayed all the leading female roles with ease and perfection. The company was also fortunate in having Janaki Devi, sister of Nageswara Rao, portraying both male and female roles with equal magnanimity. Her role of Srikrishna in *Kurukshetram* was applauded very widely. Her husband, Vanarasa Eswaraiah was the music-director of the Company.

Presenting plays written in a classical mould, the company acquired such plays as *Kala Pahad*, *Dakshya Yagnam*, *Vasantasena*, *Kurukshetram* and several others commissioned specially for this company and written by Malladi Venkatakrishna Sarma.

6. Sri Rama Satyanarayana Natya Mandali (Surabhi):

Though started in the 1930's, this company was wound up in 1948 and was started again in 1956. Vanarasa Ramaiah owner of this company was a good harmonist and also played humourous and villainous roles. His wife Narasamma was a good singer with a charming personality. Some of the well-known plays this performed were *Kurukshetram*, *Balanagamma*, *Krishnaleelalu*, *Kanakatara* and *Chintamani*.

7. Sri Vijaya Natya Mandali (Surabhi):

Managed by Rekandar Kotaiah and Vanarasa Jaya Rama Rao, brothers-in-law, this company had an outsider Andela Mallikarjuna Rao doing lead male roles and Anjanamma, wife of Kotaiah playing the lead female roles. The troupe was well equipped with the latest missionary and was known for its backstage effects in plays like *Gayopakhyanam*, *Keelugurram* and *Patalabhairavi*.

8. Sri Govardhana Natya Mandali (Surabhi):

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 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. This had well equipped missionary.

9. Sri Gajapathi Natya Mandali (Surabhi):

This company was started by Aveti Prasada Rao brother of Aveti Nageswara Rao and Chalapati Rao. Prasada Rao was a good tablist and acted both serious and humorous roles. His wife Santhakumari, daughter of Govinda Rao, did some important female roles. Ramana Kumar, son of Prasada Rao, became the manager after his father. He was the company’s harmonist and music-director. Hitamati Devi, wife of Ramana Kumar played the important female roles. Kali Vara Prasada Rao and Shyamala Rao played the important male roles. Ramana Kumar’s brother Shyamsundar was a noted actor and was the secretary of the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham after the demise of Aveti Nageswara Rao. It was unfortunate that Shyamsundar died at an young age.

10. Vasundhara Natya Mandali (Surabhi):

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* was wound up in the late 50’s.

In addition to these ten major theatre companies there were 26 minor companies, all started and managed by Surabhi personnel were recorded in the year 1956. None of them exist as on today. However the managers and the names of their companies could be given for the record.

<u>Founder’s Name</u>	<u>Company’s Name</u>
1. Smt. Poornima & A. Ramaiah	Poornima Surabhi Natya Mandali
2. Sri R. Venkoba Rao	
3. Sri V. Venkoba Rao	
4. Smt. R. Kamakshi Bai	
5. Sri V. Mohan Rao	
6. Sri R. Pullaiah & Sambhulingam	
7. Sri V. Chakrapani	
8. Sri V. China Veeranjanyulu	
9. Sri R. Satyanarayana	
10. Sri V. Tirupati Rao	
11. Sri V. Ramachandra Rao	
12. Sri R. Venkata Rao	
13. Sri V. Koteswara Rao	
14. Smt. V. Padma Bai	
15. Smt. V. Gouri Bai	

16. Sri R. Mane Rao
17. Sri R. Lakshmana Rao
18. Sri A. Venkata Rao
19. Smt. V. Neelaveni Bai
20. Sri R. Jayarama Rao
21. Smt. R. Manorama
22. Sri V. Satyanarayana
23. Sri S. Reddamma
24. Sri S. Reddappa
25. Sri V. Vithoba Rao
26. Sri R. Tulasi Rao

TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

IN SEARCH OF NEW PASTURES: THE RURAL THEATRE

One of the most important results of this proliferation of theatre companies between 1939 and 1956 was the constant search for new areas for performance. The major companies by then toured almost every small town in Andhra and had established a name for Surabhi. The new groups, if they want to compete with the companies that staged plays earlier, must be equally good both in qualitatively and quantitatively. Many of the new companies, started either due to internal dissensions or outward pressures, could not easily compete with the established ones. So they had to seek alternative places of performance. Only the big village centers were left behind by the earlier companies. So the new companies started migrating to the smaller rural areas, that is, to the interiors of the district.

By 1943, doing plays in towns by such a large contingent had become out of question. The war years had affected the town dwellers more than the village dwellers. Essential commodities would still be available for a price in rural India. That was not the case in towns. It was much cheaper to stay and perform in the villages. Landlords would supply free palmyrah leaves and trunks for a tent (in case the company did not have a tin-sheet tent); the local vendor would supply essential commodities on credit. Perhaps the local farmer would send milk and vegetables for a concessional price if he and his family were allowed free for the show of each play and so on. That was another reason why new theatres moved on to rural areas.

Not only the new theatres. Even the old ones now preferred to go to villages. Even earlier they performed in notable villages and that was during a village festival. For all the major festivals in Andhra, a Surabhi group would be present plays on all the days of the festival. In fact, before 1940 local people would take a contract to present Surabhi plays during the festival of a local goddess (jatara) and thereby get some commission.

By the time the war ended, things were much worse in towns and big villages. It was not merely economic depression. It was the invasion of the cinema. Every town and big village had at least a 'touring talkies', not to speak of a permanent theatre. Theatre halls exclusively constructed for staging plays had been converted into cinema halls overnight. This had become a craze even with the townspeople. There were days when a successful Surabhi Company's performances forced local cinema halls to stop their shows for fear of

heavy losses. We have recorded instances to show that with the help of the local political leaders and revenue officials, cinema hall owners and distributors saw to it that the Surabhi Company was not given permission to stage plays. This was done on some plea and to clear it would take a long time.

This was the bone of contention of the Surabhi people from the very beginning. During the British days, stage plays were looked at as some “new madness” and were allowed, because there was so harm intended to anyone. But when once the gains of a particular sect of people were at stake, they used all their might to stop the performances. This also forced to companies to go to places where cinema halls were not functioning. This amounted to going to smaller place and to remote areas.

This forced migration to the remote rural places had had an cursavory effect on the general quality of the Surabhi plays. Plays and performances of a high caliber, appreciated by the elitist class and the intelligential was the proud reckoning of Surabhi. But by this venturesome proliferation and multiplication of companies and the resultant influence on the quality of the plays was a sad reflection on the pressures being built up on Surabhi performers. This naturally demanded that what the audiences received well and appreciated must be given a predominant place in the production. Thus values were topsy-turvyed in over ten years. The audience liked good rhetoric and delicious rendering of songs and poems earlier. Now thy liked dances and comic buffoonery. A commercial company must please its audiences in the way it wanted.

This was the reason why technical manipulations, tricks, awe-inspiring gimmick showing supernatural powers, cinematic tricks and fights – replaced good acting. The damage that this tendency had caused Surabhi was irreparable because today Surabhi was viewed more or less as a company showing stage tricks. Two arrows fighting, Vasudeva taking child Krishna when the sea given way, Krishna in Kalindi tank when a five-hooded snake fumes and Krishna dances on it. Its real worth of a well-knit, unified, highly appreciable literary presentation was completely lost because of the circumstances under which these companies performed.

A NEW GENERATION OF AUDIENCES:

It was at this time-during 1935-45 – that the whole pattern of viewership had changed. Hitherto mythological plays, with characters of supernatural powers, moral conflicts and ‘lilas’ of Gods Gods and Goddesses were prominent even in the main-stream theatre. It was so with the Surabhi audiences as well. Surabhi theatres had an edge over the other Musical plays of other groups because they could show the supernatural heroes visually (though an illusion) performing supernatural deads. Srikrishna sent his ‘chakra’ to kill Sisupala; Ghatotkacha carried Sasirekha to his abode and the bed flew in the air. So there was a near-believability in the characters and their doing. But, with the advent of realism in drama in 1930’s, drama was expected to conform to the rules of verisimilitude.

The realistic period in Telugu drama started as early as 1928 when the centenary of Henrik Ibsen was celebrated in Madras. Playwrights like P. V. Rajamannar and P. V. Rangaram wrote on contemporary problems. The plays were in prose and had domestic, familial problems as the conflict in the plays. This tendency had gathered momentum by 1943 when the Indian People’s Theatre Association’s (IPTA) Telugu counterpart, Praja Natya

Mandali had embarked on a thunderous theatrical movement in the rural areas with the Zamindar exploitation as the major problems. 'Maa Bhumi' and 'Mundadugu', the two plays by Praja Natya Mandali were staged by 500 separate theatre units in over 10000 performances until the then government banned them. There was a strong realistic wind that swept away the romantic and moralistic stance of the earlier drama.

It was at the same time that the second phase of Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad had embarked upon a massive campaign for a new theatre for the realistic social problem play. This play should reach the common man and so must be in the common man's language. So prose had replaced poetry and song. Under a new dispensation, Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad had given a six-point character to modernize Telugu play out of which new regulations were drawn for the conduct of competitions in Telugu dramatic writing and performances. Eversince that time, the prose problem had come to stay, almost relegating the mythological musical plays into near oblivion.

In this process Surabhi also suffered.

The Rural Theatre: New Challenges

Surabhi's gradual migration into the rural areas had resulted in shaping its present day structure. Previously, Surabhi theatres catered to a multi-polar audience: it had all sections of towns' people in its fold. There were intellectuals, workers, students and middle-class white-collared working men and their families. It specially saw to it that it remained a family entertainment. Good literary pieces were set to commendable presentations with a well-knit, well-disciplined team of both on-stage and off-stage performers. It did not look for, or allowed improvisations of any sort. The actors were trained to adhere 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; character conflicts must, more often than not, be direct confrontations, physical ones not excluded. Broad acting techniques, erratic dialogues with double meanings, physical gestures of suggestive eroticism were the kinds that 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 tends 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 audience whistled for an out-of-the-scene dance in a court sequence or thundered with uproarious laughter when a comic character reveled in useless prattles. These guided the not-so-discriminating minds of some of the Manager 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. Unlike in other states where stage music comprised mainly of songs – dramatic and rhythmic at the same time – and occasional group songs in the form of chorus. They had also poems rendered musically set to a raga, but that was rare. But in Andhra, the entire situation had reversed.

Since 1886 when Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu wrote his *Chitranaleeyam* and stage it with elaborate singing, it swept the theatre world by surprise and novelty. The Telugu audience took to this new genre like ducks take to water. They called it “Padya Natakam” and are proud that no other theatre in any other language has this unique dramatic genre where padyam (a metrical stanza like ‘utpalamala’, ‘champakamala’ etc.) is sung to a raga with an elaborate rendering of raga even after the poem is over. When this attracted the Telugu spectators, plays that were written in prose, inserted poems into them, and became great hits on the stage, largely because of the poems.

Judiciously used, the mellifluous poem, set to a raga, and rendered dramatically, has a theatrical attribute of its own. But to make the poem alone an equivalent of the whole dramatic sensibility is taking things too far. This tendency has since peculated to the nooks and corners of the Telugu land. An illiterate boy, taking the buffaloes for grazing, would sing these poems with *élan*, and enjoy. Great masters of drama used it with discretion. Panuganti Laxminarasimha Rao’s dramatic poems, Tirupati Venkata Kavulu’s poems that came nearer to day-to-day conversational dialogue and Chilakamarti’s poems that throw light on nativity in characterization were held as models of dramatic writing.

It was in this background of the wide popularity of the “Padya natakam” that we have to evaluate the new challenges that confronted the new Surabhi theatres when they decided to stage their plays in the rural areas. Unlike in the cities and the towns, where drama was looked at as a composite art, in villages drama was still a vehicle for rendering ‘padyams’ musically. The Surabhi theatres were never known for great singing talents after the first generation people like Papabai. 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. Most of Govinda Rao’s daughters were adept in singing. So were their daughters. Their men folk preferred to be good harmonists rather than good singers; if they were good actors, it was in non-singing parts. 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, Subba Das 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. There were other known actors that came into Surabhi from time to time, but the new exigencies demanded a greater participation by outside artists.

While they had demands from the audience and had to act accordingly to appease them, their internal mechanism was not sound either. They had actors who did the roles imitating them from their elders. They did not have training of any sort within the companies. Neither were they educated enough to learn the nuances of analyzing a character and interpreting it. Some of the Surabhi people were great teachers: for example Papabai, China Ramaiah and Subhadramma. Others did not have the capacity; they were mere actors. And acting for them meant imitating their own elders within the companies or imitating actors in the main-stream theatre. Since mere imitating lands people in mediocrity, these actors were never sure of themselves. They acted in the companies simply because they earned a living. They belonged to a profession and there was some regular income forthcoming!

The places of presenting plays turned out to be another challenge to the Surabhi theatre people. They avoided the cities of the costs involved in a group of seventy or eighty to sustain for a number of days. There was also a paucity of proper performance place in the cities. They intentionally chose a place where there was no cinema theatre. That would

naturally mean a place where transparent was a problem. In the old days people used to go by bullock-carts for jataras of the local gods with families. The temple and its surroundings gave them enough place to take shelter for a night or two. Now that the only available place in a village was its outskirts in the open fields, similar provisions were missing. Secondly, the village fairs and festivals had a ritualistic and religious sanctity which a mere theatrical performance did not have. Besides these psychological reasons, the places of performances often deterred public to attend. The tent was constructed in the midst of the fields. Even a small shower or rain would make the place inhabitable, let alone people coming from the village to traverse that short distance. There were occasions when the tin sheets that covered the tent house had been blown off and the pit dug for the spectator's seats was filled with knee-deep water.

Added to these physical and psychological pressures emanating from within and outside, there were more problems of an administrative nature. Each company had to take permission draw from the Panchayat for erecting a tent and 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 line man asked for favours. Even the slightest disapproval from the Manager would result in the permission being rejected on one plea or the other.

In his welcome address to the public on the occasion of the Saptati Celebrations of Surabhi theatres in 1956, the secretary of the Surabhi Nataka Kala Sangham, Aveti Nageswara Rao, bemoaned their plight due to beaurocratic indifference:

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 process involved in obtaining the necessary licenses at times from the numerous departments and the trouble involved, to same extent, in obtaining suitable avenues. We are compelled to avoid cities, as our troupe eighty has to live by it 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 of its own, with dynamo 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 shows the many-sided obstacles that infringed on the Surabhi companies to sustain their existence.

Receding Interests and Dwindling Finaces:

Surabhi theatres contained this uncertain existence for over two decades. The onset of Television had had a big blow on public performances all over India. It was new and people thronged around the idiot box with awe and surprise. In no time technology had been

extended to small towns and then to big villages. The village community centres all over Andhra were again the facility of a T.V. set in order to see the farmers' programmes in the evening. The T.V. set was usually kept in the Panchayat office where all the village elders gathered not only to see the farmer's programmes but also to discuss other matters. Soon there were cinemas on the T.V. And that had a felling effect on Surabhi.

When novel entertainment attracted the attention of the rural masses, and with the paucity of untrained actors with average capabilities, Surabhi theatres had a real set back in the eighty years of their existence. To keep a company active would mean to feed and/or to spend a monthly expenditure of not less than forty to fifty thousand rupees. The income slowly receded and the needs increased. Many Surabhi managers would up their activities with heavy losses. The actor-families that served these companies had to resort to other professions in which they were not proficient. This was the case at the turn of the century.

Some companies had to wind up their activities when the eldest among them – the Manager – died and no one was there to take up the responsibility.

A very few companies, however, withstood this onslaught of fate and remained active. Among them, two are major companies and three minor. We will now see how these companies are working and what their plans for the future are.

Social Life of Surabhi People

The four Surabhi families – Vanarasa, Rekandar, Aveti and Sindhe – like all the earlier puppeteering families are migrants from Maharashtra long ago. They originally settled down in places near Mysore and, in course of time, came and settled in the Rayalaseema area. The puppeteers in Karnataka, as in Andhra, are Aare people and have common family names. There are, of course, five more sects with families names other than the four mentioned above are found in Karnataka. This proves that some families from among the puppeteers came to the Rayalaseema area, and learnt Telugu and later puppeteering in Telugu and settled down there. This must have happened in the later 18th century for textual evidence proves beyond doubt that until the early part of 18th century native puppeteers belonging to the Jangam (Veera Saiva) community practised this art as family profession. Names of the puppeteers of Maharashtra origin started appearing in 1840 which indicate that these migrants learnt the art from the native Jangams and took up puppeteering as their profession.

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 members of the Telugu community; but in their familial customs, they follow their age-old customs. They also worship the Gods as all other Telugu people do. Rama, Balaji (Venkateswara Swamy) 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. Anjaneya was the personal god of Govinda Rao and the temple of Anjaneya at Undi was his favourite. He gave munificent gifts to Anjaneya temples if he came across them on his tours.

Their clan deity was Amba. They were all Saivites and wear yagnopaveeta, the sacred thread. Their worshipful temple 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 so marriages, took place only within the four.

Among the four families, the Vanarasa family is the largest and is also in 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 selections of brides and bridegrooms. Though they have not rejected outside families, they neither encouraged them. It was so because, in the early days, their antecedents were questioned and marriages were not encouraged where sect, creed and caste were not native and could be traced at least to four generations. As such, old men marrying young girls were common in Surabhi families and their allied families. When a boy could not be found suitable to a girl in age, she was as well 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 wife was very natural among the puppeteers. It was purely for the sake of the profession. 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 amenable to 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 and China Ramaiah had two wives. 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 family.

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 tribal level of living and continued to be so all through. In this community family is the nucleus, giving importance to the clan relationships. As in most tribal groups (for Aare has no written tradition, only as oral one) the woman is the head of the family. Though, when they adopted the Telugu customs and traditions, the man adopted the Telugu customs and traditions, the man seems to be important, within the family he is only a figure-head. It is the woman that is more intelligent, more meritorious and more tolerant than the man. If we perceive the Surabhi people, the woman at the head of the family and the force behind the man seemed to be responsible for the success of the family and the theatre company as well. This was nowhere better proved than in the daughters of Govinda Rao who were first-rate actresses, but also successful managers.

The role of the woman in the Surabhi families will not only be discernible in maintaining the professional groups in tact, but also in keeping the family in tact. Unlike women out the Surabhi families who would have been jealous of a second wife, the women seemed to have the farsightedness to understand the societal customs and traditional norms and welcomed the second wives when their traditional norms and welcomed the second wives when their husbands married again. They knew that it was a necessary evil and so lived

amicably with the “other” woman. This habit of marrying again and again was to a large extent put to rest, partly because some of the daughters in recent years are married outside their own families and partly because they present generation families had fewer daughters.

In yet another area in which this solidarity is maintained can be understand from the fact that the different families in a company live together, though each family has a “tent” of its own and live separately, they all live together like one ethnic group closely knit together and in the process live like one family made up of different brothers and sisters and remind us of a combined family of yester years!

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, not even between a man and a woman. The only difference in payment is between an adult and a child. A child also is paid. No work is taken free. The person who played the king’s role and the person who played his servant were paid equally. So was the case with the queen and her maid. 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 greater or more important than the other.

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 that from their group. Half of the paid remuneration would go to the main performers and the other half used to the other puppeteer families. When Surabhi people changed over from puppetry to theatre they retained this “equal sharing of earnings”.

The way of sharing the income in the old days was equally interesting. After a camp was wound up, they deducted all the expenses and from the residual amount, one share was kept separate for God and rituals. This money was spent for gifts to temples, for honouring scholars, towards payment of school fees for poor students and other welfare activities. Another “share” was reserved for “stage”. This was to buy machines, costumes, make-up materials and everything that goes for production. Preparing curtains and painting them also come under this category. One “share” was completely spent for “lighting”, for dynamo, for bulbs, since this was the most identifiable distinction that a Surabhi company boasted of. The remaining amount was shared among the members – the adult getting one full share and a child half. The amount is equally divided among all the people in this ratio. “Equally in payment for whatever work was done” was the motto of these people. The Manager was often paid a one anna or half an anna share – by any standard a very meager amount.

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. All that was considered to be “stage property”. The materials given would be of common use. This was to avoid any type of prejudices among the artistes.

Of course, when the companies came under the jurisdiction of managers, all the people associated with a Surabhi production get a monthly salary and live in the zinc sheds attached to the hall.

There is another social custom that is closely related to their profession. In case two successful camps did not earn enough money to share, they resort to the “common kitchen”

concept. 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 continued until things became normal and camps did well. This remained 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 the needy members. When a camp is on and performances are put on board, there is 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 done in the camp ‘house’ only and all the people participate in it to bless the couple.

Women folk are very prominent and active in Surabhi families. They are good at living. In the previous generation they also managed companies; they proved better managers than men. Even when the management was in the name of the men, it was more often the women administered the company. Besides, they also managed the female ticket counters. Sometimes they are also in charge of pulling the curtains.

We have eye-witness accounts of the professional attitude of Surabhi men and women, especially women. Hari Purushotham, a playwright for many Surabhi companies, reports that he actually saw the woman who was taking the role of Chintamani, a prostitute, had a tussle with her husband just before the play began. He struck with 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 moment she entered the stage.

The women are also in-charge of the costume and ornament department. 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 gave 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 traveling by a bullock cart.

A fact that any spectator find and is stuck with surprise is the presence of very young children on the stage. 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.

Surabhi People’s Artistic Life:

Each company will have about sixty members, men and women, young and old. Everyone shares the work in pitching the tent, in removing it, inside the hall and outside without any distinction. Usually harmonists and engine workers and lighting men are Surabhi’s own people. There is no specific role division among the members. All the people know all the parts. Women take women’s parts. Women can occasionally take male roles. There are important actresses like Papabai, Ramabai, Subhadramma, Janakamma and others who wielded both the types of 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 work, but also helping others. That theatre is a composite are and everyone connected with it must work in unision to make the production a success is nowhere better seen than in the Surabhi companies.

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*'). It is already said that in most cases it istype of casting. Occasionally 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 Krishnamachari's theatre, which seemed to have set an example of a near professional theatre's discipline, only men played female roles. In a way, the greatest attraction, in the initial days of Surabhi's existence, was that women play roles on the stage and showed all the *rasas* including *sringara* to the astonishment of one and all.

Though the idea of understudy was never in existence, there were actors available always 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 is, in a way, a continuation of the tradition in puppet shows. In puppet shows, every performer knows the entire text. They know it by way of repeating the lines of the songs in the chorus everyone might they perform. The children leant the art by seeing their parents perform and by repeating the lines (*vantha*: accompanying) as in choral repetition. The same tradition seems to have been continued here. Since there will be at least about 15 to 20 performances of each play during an year, and will have that number of rehearsals, the performers will bet 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 an insignificant and 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 character. Such examples abound even in women. Only because they don't have such distinctions and became everyone can do any role in that age group, the Surabhi companies can overcome many exigencies of ill-health, accident, etc. and continue doing the performances without any hindrance.

Until recently 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 place looks like 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 tablist. Yet another place people preparing or mending wigs, on one side costume-making women – it is a combination of a 'gurukulam' and a working shop.

The manager calls those actors who faltered or went wrong during the last night's performance and advises them as to how to rectify them. There will be one person in-charge for the booking outside for advertisement, and for each branch. Everyone does his or her

work conscientiously. When the play is going on, several people will be in-charge of curtain drawing, preparing a set, getting ready for wire-work, focusing, lighting effects, “tricks” (special effects) etc. Even people in costume and makeup and doing major roles do not hesitate to pull a curtain or help arrange as stage prop. Such is the co-ordinated effort of the Surabhi people to make a success of the production.

Besides two people will be given charge of the costume after the play is over. As each play will have different costume, it will not be difficult for the costume men or women to arrange necessary clothes for the next show. So is the case with setting. Set properties, wire work materials and scenery pieces will be different for each play. Usually a Surabhi team performs plays on alternate days and so it is easy for the backstage people to keep things in order for the next show.

Everyone can prompt for anyone during the play. Not that prompting is necessary, but all of them know all the parts. Even then, a man will hold the book and is ready in the wings to prompt. Lighting, stage technicians see that there will not even be a wink’s pause between one scene and the other. In no time will the lighting arrangement for the previous scene is put off and another arrangement is put on for the next scene – almost in a fraction of a second. The technicians are such specialists. Some companies have got the facility of a trolley stage. When a scene is going on another scene can be got ready on the trolley and pushed on to the stage. This stage is being used with great advantage by the Surabhi people.

It is customary that Surabhi companies commission their plays. They are specially written by playwrights to suit the company and the actors in it. They write the plays consultation with the managers and the major actors. The plays are written with the potentialities of the actors in view. If a singer is to do a particular role, he will be specially provided with poems and songs.

It is wonderful to see how when a play is in the making, all things connected with its production immediately start taking shape. By the time the final draft is ready and the play goes for rehearsals, special curtains, settings, dresses and all the necessary accessories will also be in the process of preparation. By the time the first performance taken place, every necessary ingredient is properly set.

The Surabhi people are very particular about auspicious days, muhurtams and good omens. They perform the *raga puja*, the invocation and all other necessary rituals whenever they start a new play, besides doing invocatory rituals for each play. They usually invite friends and elders in the literary and theatre fields for the first show and listen to their suggestions and implement them.

The writer is also the director. He concentrates on the textual part, on songs and poems and on dialogue delivery. Movements, entrances and exits, and other presentational aspects will be taken care of by the manager or, in his absence, by a senior actor. After the play’s first production is over, the playwright, who is called “Kavi” (poet) is honoured and is sent away. From then onwards the manager is solely in-charge of the production.

Several stories on circulation regarding the dutifulness and valour of the Surabhi people. A senior actor, Anjanappa in Sri Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali, was acting as Harischandra at a small village, when the company camped there. His son was admitted in a nearby town hospital for typhoid. The boy was serious. The mother did not want Anjanappa

to go the village and do the role. But Anjanappa said that God wanted him to do his duty and He would take care of the boy. Anjanappa went, played the part amidst intense tension, both to him and the manager and the team. He rushed back after the play to the hospital and the boy was safe. Such instances are aplenty to show that a Surabhi member the show is all-important.

Similarly there are many stories that talk about the valour and daring nature of the Surabhi people. In 1924 a group of goondas were employed by wasted interests to attack and threaten the Surabhi people. The Surabhi men and women came to know of this and got ready with whatever weapon they could lay hands on. The ladies opened their condimum box; they took bag full of mirchi powder. They left the hall and went on to a hillock nearby. The goondas came, saw the hall empty and founded them on the hillock. They did not want to leave them. So they started climbing the hillock. The Surabhi men and women, enraged, started getting down and attacked the goondas with sticks and sickles and the women poured mirchi powder in the eyes of the goondas. Later no attacks came their way. This was an account narrated by Papabai, one of the proud participants in this escapade.

All the major Surabhi companies are self-reliant. They do not depend on any outside agency to do their work. They have a contingency of backstage workers besides the actors and actresses. The carpenters, machine men, costume and ornament makers, painters of sceneries, ticket sellers, gate keepers and workers of every nature form the Surabhi group. As these are a part of the larger family of Surabhi – all cousins and nephews – the workers also feel that they are doing the work for themselves and not for anyone outside their group.

This camaraderie is further strengthened in their publicity campaigns. The pamphlets and wall posters of Surabhi plays do not contain the names of any actor or actress. Nor are the names of music directors and scenic designers. It is all a co-operative art. Very rarely do they advertise the names of the actors: one occasion is when a famous actor from outside participates in a play or when Surabhi's own member, who got fame in the cinema field or outside, comes back to participate in some benefit shows as in the case of Surabhi Kamalabai or Surabhi Balasaraswathi. No Surabhi person is fond of undue publicity. They feel that they are a part of a family enterprise, the success of which depends on everyone's willing participation.

THE PLAYS

When the first Surabhi theatre started it was the only one family professional touring theatre in Andhra. During this first phase (1889-1927) Govinda Rao was virtually the leader, though the Company was variously known as Ramaiah's troupe or Venkoji's troupe. For a short while when the Company went to Rangoon Ramaiah and Papabai were the proprietors. After coming back Govinda Rao became the proprietor and ran a company of 150 people with 30 families. In 1927 the Company divided into two, Govinda Rao started Surabhi Govindaraya Natya Mandali and Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta Nataka Sabha, the original theatre, was given to Vanarasa China Ramaiah, a cousin of Govinda Rao, who ran it until 1940. Intermittently two more companies with the same name Sarada Manovinodini Sabha emerged: Krishnaji had run it from 1910 to 1920. The Company that was run by Peda Ramaiah was given to his foster daughter, Papabai in 1920. She ran it only for five years, until 1925. From 1930 onwards several other Surabhi theatre groups emerged, all belonging to the families of the first trio.

Eversince the Surabhi Company wanted to tour and make a living out of it; it wanted to acquire more plays, specially written for them. Plays thus commissioned were not the monopoly of the Company for which it was written. But it was given to whichever company asked it. Only once was there a dispute involving Vanarasa Subba Rao of the Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali and Aveti Nageswara Rao of the New Poorna Theatre Dramatic Association with regard to a single play.

The following is a list of the plays the major Surabhi Companies performed. It is evident that there are more pauranic plays than historical or social. Historical plays are very few, the reason being the large number of historical plays that were being performed between 1920-47 in the other Companies outside the Surabhi. The social plays were relatively recent and were not found to be popular both with the actors and the audience as well. On the whole, mythological plays which require lots of tricks and technical manipulation seem to be the Surabhi people's first option.

EARLY PLAYS:

Keechaka Vadha:

The first plays that the Surabhi people performed after they moved from puppetry to theatre.

The script was not written by anyone; it was a script used for puppet shows; a format that would fit into a puppet show / a yakshagana or bayalata. The team also performed it as they did the puppet show sans puppets.

In a puppet show the practice is that a male member takes up a male puppet and a female member a female puppet. This practice came handy when the text was presented on the stage, before the curtains rather than behind the curtains.

Keechaka Vadha is a popular story from "Virata Parvam" of the Mahabharata and traces the conflict between Virata's brother-in-law, a powerful man and Bhima. The latter killed Keechaka. This story is still one of the most popular puppet plays, along with 'Sundarakanda' ('Lankadahanam' from the Ramayana) and 'Sasirekharinayam' (from the Mahabharata).

A list of the first participants is also available to us, thanks to China Ramaiah, who played the part of Sahadeva in it:

Keechaka: Krishnaiah; Bhima: Peda Ramaiah; Kankubhattu: Venkaiah; Brihannala: Peda Ramaiah's son Vazeerappa; Nakula: Govindappa; Sahadeva: China Ramaiah; Sairandhri: Papabai; Sudheshna: Peda Subbamma; Uttara: China Subbamma.

Harischandra, Sarangadhara and Sakuntala:

These three plays were written for the Surabhi Company by Raptati Subbadas, a writer, actor, director and later a congress activist and in later years a Haridas and Yogi. A multi-faceted writer-director, he monitored the early training programme of the Surabhi people. He gave the Surabhi performers an identity and a name. It was he that called the group Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta Nataka Sabha. Under its aegis he wrote the three

plays, taught them to the troupe members and toured with them, donning the lead roles in them.

“Harischandra” was a popular play in the folk theatre tradition and it was popular even with the Surabhi people. The story taken from It deals with the nature and greatness of truth, an eternal value decider of human qualities. This is not popular in the puppet tradition. However, the writing of the play by Subbadas reflects his own thinking – he is more and more drawn towards the spiritual and this play would be a pointer towards this end.

Though Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta Nataka Sabha staged Subbadas’ Harischandra during the first years of its tours, by 1906 it switched over to another popular *Harischandra* written by Balijepally Laxmikantha Kavi. The play has been a great hit on the stage. Surabhi also took it over. It is interesting to note that the poet Balijepally and the most well-known of the actors who played Harischandra, Hari Prasada Rao were invited participation in the play with the Surabhi people. The play was performed at Guntur on October 25, 1928 and was a great success.

Sarangadhara, based on a popular legend popular in Andhra, was also a familiar play in the folk theatre. It had strong characters in Sarangadhara, the Prince who rejected the secret overtures made by his step-mother, Chitrangi who got wild when rejected, reported against Sarangadhara to the king, Raja Raja Narendra who ordered that his son’s hands and legs were to be cut. Later, of course, a sanyasi came and saved the young Prince. Meanwhile the wile attitude of Chitrangi was known to the king who ordered that she be beheaded.

The play had some moving scenes of pathos and love. Subbadas loved to play the Raja’s role in this play while China Ramaiah played the role of Sarangadhara to Papabai’s Chitrangi. It was kept in the repertoire of Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta Nataka Sabha – for quite sometime. Laxmamma, Govinda Rao’s second wife was reported to show the two opposing attitudes of Chitrangi – love and offended villainy – with equal mastery.

The third plays, *Sakuntala*, Subbadas’ translation of Kalidasa’s immortal work, seemed to have stayed with the Company only until the author was with it. Subbadas played Dushyanta to Papabai’s Sakuntala. As the play was too classical for the common audience that usually patronize Surabhi, the play had its last show in Secunderabad and later in Madras (1904).

Stree Sahasam and Jaganmohana:

Two plays that were improvised by Krishnaiah who had a flair for writing and the plays were obviously drawn from other sources and both seem to have strong Parsi ancestry. As the Parsi plays performed in Madras or in Andhra were mainly in Hindustani, it was not difficult for Krishnaiah and the team to understand the main idea and the thrust of the major scenes.

They served as stop-gap arrangement during their first tour of coastal Andhra in 1901 when they approached playwrights to write plays for them.

Parijathapaharanam and Bilhaneeyam:

These two plays were written by Marepalli Ramachandra Sastry, popularly called “Kavi garu”. In the introduction to *Parijatapaharanam*, a story of Sri Krishna bringing the Parijatha plant for Satyabhama, Kavi garu started that the original play written in 1899 and performed by his own Kalabhilashaka Nataka Sangham at Visakhapatnam was altered “to suit the Surabhi actors” in 1901. It was staged by the Surabhi Company for the next four seasons, when they discarded the traditional padya-natakam type of plays for more technically-oriented, trick-dominated parsi-type of plays.

Bilhaneeyam, a play on the poet Bilhana, is short-lived for, the play, like *Sakuntalam*, was classic both in its conception and execution.

Kanthamati, Balhana Charitra and Myravana:

These plays were also improvisations, the songs for which were supplied by Tadakaluri Kuppaswamy, who was the song-writer for Marepally Ramachandra Sastry and was also known for his parsi-type of tunes (‘matlu’ as they are called) in many contemporary plays.

Kanthamati is a legend popular in the South and had a bearing on ‘Sadarama’, a popular play written in Kannada by It was one of Gubbi Company’s hits. The play; though popular with the rural audiences because of the love episodes of 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), but the play, as improvised, fell short of a perfect play with a loose construction of the plot, having no eye on characterization.

Myravana, an episode that is popular in the puppet tradition, has been improvised as a play by Krishnaji with some new songs now introduced by Tadakaluri Kuppaswamy. *Myravana*, which is not a part of the Ramayana story, but is a local version tracing the victory of Rama over Ravana’s friend and king of the underworld. *Bhallana Charitra*, again, is again a semi-folklore story from Karnataka.

Among, the three plays, ‘*Myravana*’ and ‘*Ballana Charitra*’ were soon discarded by the Surabhi Companies and in 1906 *Kanthamati* was commissioned to be specially written by Sriramula Sachidananda Sastry. The play, until recently, was one of the most popular of Surabhi plays.

Chandrakantha:

Chandrakantha, again, is a story based on folklore and was written by Vajjhala Chintamani Sastry a veteran pundit and Sanskritist. The play was written on request from Govinda Rao during his tour of North-eastern coast of Andhra during 1901-02. It was also discarded after full-fledged costume-cum-trick-scene importance grew in Surabhi.

Dasavataramulu:

This play was written by Bulusu Seetharama Sastry of Bobbili during their performances at the town on their returning journey in 1902 from Barampuram and Srikakulam. The play has stayed with the Surabhi Company even upto 1930. It was written at the request of China Ramaiah for it has several episodes in which he could show his mettle as an actor of the Dheerodhata type.

The play had added attractions in having poems drawn from the popular epic of *Bhagavatham* written by Pothana and tuneful keertans. The play's attraction in its original production increased because Poornima, then a young girl of ten, did the role of Prahlada with great aplomb.

Individual scenes with awe-struck visuals started with this play. Vishnu in Vishnuloka as "Seshatalpasayi" and each incarnation in its own natural habitat was created to great effect. Besides China Ramiah or Anjanappa in the roles of Krishna, Rama and other incarnations, the rakshasa roles done by T. Koteswara Rao were highly evocative. The play drew large crowds and brought Surabhi both fame and money.

Jaganmohana:

Malladi Achyutarama Sastry who was one of the popular playwrights of the early 20th century who wrote plays for 'companies' was specially requested to write the play for the company. The play was made popular by the Gubbi Company. Following the Kannada play, Sastry wrote a well-knit play in which truth ultimately wins. Due to Veerasena's truthfulness till the end of the play and the true love between Mandavi and Mohana, Jaganmohana who lost his life due to the vile manipulations of Ghatodari, is brought back to life. The play, like a later day *Balanagamma*, is a success in the rural areas for its thrilling scenes.

Seetha Kalyanam and Narakasura Vadha:

A play by Chilakamarthi Laxminarasimham, a well-known playwright of 'Padya Natakam' fame, was originally written for the Hindu Nataka Samajam of Rajahmundry. When the Surabhi Company was playing at Rajahmundry, Govinda Rao requested Chilakamarti to allow them to perform two of the plays he had written by that time – *Seetha Kalyanam* and *Narakasura Vadha*. Though *Seetha Kalyanam* was performed only for one season, *Narakasura Vadha* stayed with them for over five seasons and usually filled in a gap when they shifted a camp.

Sampoorna Mahabharatam:

This play had at least two versions, played by two different Surabhi groups. The first one and the most popular one was by Bellary Pandita K. Subrahmanya Sastry, a veteran playwright whose *Draupadi Vastrapaharanam* was also a renowned play staged both by Surabhi people and many other theatre groups all over Andhra. The second play with the same title was written much later by Hari Purushotham of Bhimavaram for Aveti Venkataswamy's company, New Poornananda Dramatic Theatre.

The play started with the young Pandavas and Kauravas in an archery competition and how Arjuna defeats the Kauravas. The burning of the Lac House breaking of Matsya yantra and marrying Draupadi and so on, ending with Bhagavadgita and Pandava's win. The play is still popular with the existing Surabhi companies, as it has many visual feats that thrill the audience.

Kumara Vijayamu and Ravana Charyalu (or Ravana Natakam):

These two plays were written by another renowned playwright Chakravadhanula Manikya Sarma for Govinda Rao through China Ramaiah's Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha also made use of them.

"*Ravana Charyalu*" was the story of Ravana and tried to look at his character as that of a tragic character whose fall was due to destiny and a curse from a sage. It showed the weaknesses of Ravana as two-fold; his ego-centric personality and his weakness for the beautiful on earth. The character of Ravana was wielded with care, though all the other characters look puppets.

One of the best plays in the early phase of both Sri Sarada Manovinodini Nataka Sabha the Govindaraya Surabhi Nataka Mandali, "*Kumara Vijayamu*" is a dramatization of an important story from "Siva Puranam".

"*Siva Puranam*" is virtually a treasure-house from where playwrights borrowed stories and dramatized them with success. *Tulasi Jalandhara*, *Veerbhadrha Vijayam*, *Parvati Kalyanam*, *Mohini Bhasmasura* and several others had their origins from this *magnum opus* of Saiva epic. The story of Kumara (also known as Shanmukha) can be found in Kalidasa's '*Kumara Sambhava*' and in Telugu in Nannechoda's *Kumara Sambhava*, an epic. When the story is dramatized, proper care is taken to make the play amenable for actors, for spectators and, no less important, for production.

The story was divided into five units, each unit being shown in an act, enabling smaller groups to use any of the acts as a short performance. The play's five acts are: 1. Dhaksha's yagna, 2. Veerabhadrha Vijaya, 3. Narada Garvabhanga, 4. Kama Dahana, 5. Kumara Vijayam. The play ends with Shanmukha's wedding with Devasena. The play though looks episodic, has a thread of unity throughout: the killing of Tarakasura.

The play has great acting potential. When the play performed by the Govindaraya Suarabhi Nataka Mandali, it received universal acclaim as one of Surabhi's ablest productions.

T. Koteswara Rao as Tarakasura stole the show with his meritorious voice, his meaningful dialogue delivery and his controlled action. V. Anjanappa as Shiva and Laxmibai as Parvati brought to the play as chaste mythical propensity. Narasamma as Narada and Subhadramma as Manmadha were reported to be superb. They were "tantalizingly mischievous" as a paper reported. Ten year old Poornima endeared herself as Kumaraswamy. An added attraction to the play was Balojamma's "Arthanareeswara" nritya which ran for 20 minutes and enthralled the audience.

The play is a typical example of Surabhi's stage technique and tricks. Elaborate scenes showing Dhaksha yagnam, Sati Devi's sacrificial death in fire, Parvathi's appearance as Mahakali to Tarakasura, Kama Dahanam and Parvati's wedding were all shown with all the acumen in the hands of the Surabhi technicians. On the whole, the play has been a successful addition to Surabhi repertoire.

In later years, Manikya Sarma wrote *Bhakta Kabir* for China Ramaiah's Sarada Manovinodini Sabha which also ran for two seasons successfully.

The next seven plays are by Malladi Viswanatha Kavi Raju, a Sanskrit pundit at the Maharaja's college, Vizianagaram and a life-long friend of Govinda Rao. A great playwright,

especially of mythological plays on one side and comic one-actors on the other; Viswanatha Kaviaraju was an honoured name among all Surabhi people. He was also responsible in guiding and advising Govinda Rao to shoulder the responsibility of organizing the first-ever consortium of theatre people, Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad.

Among the seven plays *Sati Savitri*, *Satya Harischandra* and *Mahananda* were written for Govinda Rao. The first two plays were not new either for Surabhi audience or for other audiences. *Sati Savitri*, written by Sriramula Sachidananda Sastry, was a famous play performed by another professional company, Mylavaram Company. In contrast with it Kaviraju's play was a complete alternated by serious ones. Unlike Guraza Naidu who raved and ranted across the stage with loud prowls, the character of yama was played by T. Koteswara Rao with great restraint and understanding. *Savitri* and *Satyavanta* were played by the two sisters Narasamma and Subhadramma.

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. The various tricks of Varanasi and later of the burial ground were extensively alone.

Mahananda, of course, was an entirely different play. It is a farce which is in the true Kaviraju style and very much unlike any of Surabhi's play. The play is about a king Madanakama Raju who is a fool who punishes those that willed him good and rewards those that were his adversaries. He has a friend in Bhairava Sastry, with whose help he wants to cleanse public life. The play is dominated by satirical comments on what were happening in 1930's and 40's in Zamindari's in northern Zamindari households and courts. Even the two fools think that each one is fooling the other. In the two 'sakara' type of characters played memorably by Govinda Rao's son, Subba Rao and his secretary, Kothapally Laxmaiah.

The next set of three plays – *Sri Krishnavataram*, *Lava Kusa* and *Vasantasena* written by Kaviraju for China Ramaiah's Sarada Manovinodini Sabha.

Kaviraju also wrote a social play, *Zamindar*, for Aveti Venkataswamy. Aveti Nageswara Rao had the play in his repertoire all through.

Stree Samrajyam:

This play, written by Kopparapu Subba Rao, a veteran theatre person – a writer, critic and director – is the first social play of the Surabhi Companies. It came much earlier than *Mahananda* and *Zamindar*. A play on the advantage and disadvantage of women's lib was written in 1932.

Until now, we have seen the major plays written by playwrights for the first major Surabhi Companies. When the Companies multiplied, most of the major companies got plays specially written for their troupes either keeping in view of the artistes of the Company or newness of the treatment. Some of them may be listed below:

Sampoorna Ramayanam, *Sampoorna Mahabharatam* and *Bobbili Yudham*: written by Hari Purushotham for Aveti Venkataswamy. *Balanagamma*, *Palanati Yudham* and *First Class B.A.*: written by Hari Purushotham for S.A. Baba Rao.

Another important writer for Surabhi companies is Malladi Venkata Krishna Sarma, brother of Viswanatha Kaviraju. He was also commissioned by several Surabhi companies to write plays for them:

Abhagini, a social play and *Kalapahad*, a romantic play written by Krishna Sarma for Aveti Venkataswamy.

Pratigna, *Alexander*, *Balanagamma* and *Dakshayagnam* for Vanarasa Subba Rao. *Devadas*, *Bhookailas*, *Mayabazar* for S.A. Baba Rao.

He also wrote two plays *Dakshayagnam* and *Mayala Marathi* for Aveti Nageswara Rao.

The list shows how the Surabhi companies from time to time have commissioned to write plays for them. The playwrights not only wrote plays, they also directed the plays, conducted rehearsals and got the first performance ready.

<u>Name of the Surabhi Troupe</u>	<u>Manager</u>
1. Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sangeeta Nataka Sabha (1895-1913) (1920-1925) (1925-1955)	Vanarasa Peda Ramaiah, Rama Bai Surabhi Papa Bai, Vanarasa Vajeer Rao
2. Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha (1900-1920)	Krishnaji Rao
3. Sri Sarada Manovinodini Sabha (1927-1940)	Vanarasa China Ramaiah, Vanarasa Abbaji Rao
4. Sri Vanarasa Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali (1927-1993)	Vanarasa Govinda Rao, Laxmamma Vanarasa Subba Rao, Vanarasa Koteswara Rao, Vanarasa Guru Babu
5. Rama Satyanarayana Natya Mandali (1917-1983)	Vanarasa Ramaiah
6. Sri Vijaya Natya Mandali (1930-1947)	Rekandar Sambhulingam, Vanarasa Jayaramaiah, R. Koteswara Rao
7. Sri Sarada Natya Mandali (1932-1947)	Sinduri (Sindhe) Venkatappaiah, Narasamma
8. Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali (1933-.....)	Rekandar Venkatrao, Indiradevi
9. Sri Sarada Natya Mandali (1934-1936)	Aveti Ramaiah
10. Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali (1937-1993)	Rekandar China Venkata Rao, Subhadramma, Dasarathi, Bhojaraju, Nageswara Rao (Babji)
11. Sri Sarada Manovinodini (1936-1942)	Poornima
12. Poornima Arts Theatre (1942-1972)	Poornima, Ramaiah
13. Parthasaradhi Natya Mandali (1940-1948)	Vanarasa Abbaji Rao
14. Venkateswara Natya Mandali (1939-1947)	R. Koteswari
15. Sri Sarada Vijaya Natyamandali (1943-1993)	Aveti Pullaiah, Dhanalaxmi Devi, Babu Rao
16. New Poornananda Dramatic Theatre (1943-1989)	Aveti Nageswara Rao, Chellayamma Rao, Manohara Rao
17. Govardhana Natyamandali (1943-1955)	Aveti Chalapati Rao, Nagalaxmi

18. Sri Muralidhara Natya Mandali	(1947-1951)	Madasu Narayana Rao, Kamaladevi
19. Sri Sarada Prasanna Natya Mandali	(1951-1988)	Vanarasa Venkata Rao, Vadala Narayana Rao
20. Vasundhara Natya Mandali	(1953-1959)	A. Vasundhara Devi (Shanmukha)
21. Sri Gajapati Natya Mandali	(1959-1989)	Aveti Prasada Rao, Santakumari, Ramana Kumar, Syam Sundar
22. Balabharathi Natya Mandali	(1962-1979)	Vanarasa Vijayalaxmi, Kesavarao
23. Sri Sarada Prasanna Kalamandali	(1968-1979)	Rekandar Janardhana Rao
24. Sri Vijayalaxmi Natya Mandali	(1970-1988)	Vanarasa Jayaramaiah
25. Sri Vinayaka Natya Mandali	(.....)	Rekandar Narasimha Rao, Gunavathi
26. Sri Rajarajeswari Natya Mandali	(1976-1979)	Vanarasa Babu Rao, Raghupati Rao
27. Kusumananda Dramatic Theatre	(.....)	Vanarasa Narayana Rao