



## THE SURABHI THEATRE OF ANDHRA : A LIVING LEGEND

- Prof. Ramgopal Bajaj

Until I came to Hyderabad as a professor in Residence, occupying the prestigious Radhakrishnan Chair at Hyderabad Central University, Surabhi is only a name often talked about where a discussion on Professional Theatres in India emerged. I had no occasion to see a performance and interact with them personally. Then I realized that it today occupies an important place in the history of Telugu theatre and, in fact, in the history of Indian theatre.

Prof. Nagabhushana Sarma has been an old friend ever since he was on our Board of the National School of Drama. Amiable, but curt when a point is to be made, Prof. Sarma had done a yeoman service in writing this book and allowing the non-Telugu readers to know about a great theatre tradition still nourishing, though I came to know from Prof. Sarma's book that at one time, there used to be 36 companies, but now only five. However, the tradition continues.

"Surabhi theatre", a book in 12 chapters is unique because it traces the pre-theatre days of the Surabhi people. I also learnt, again from the book, they were originally puppeteers, who, by dint of dedication and will, they emerged as theatre artists. They are not mere theatre actors. Everyone is a backstage worker, actor, singer, ticket collector and odd-job man. This versatility in theatre is very rare!

In his introduction, Prof. Sarma wrote an elaborate note on why the Surabhi is still Nourishing. His reasons are authentic and also point out why so many professional theatre groups in India, failed. The Surabhi-s are family-based. Like a well-knit family unit it is a combined effort of all the people to make the endeavour a success.

Prof. Sarma has traced the history very carefully. As he is a professional researcher, as he is a professional playwright and a director, it is not possible for ordinary critics or reviewers to have gone deep into the physical theatre practice and the psyche behind it. The role of Sri Vanarapa Govinda Rao is brought out elaborately as he is the artist behind the success of Surabhi.



The Book touches upon the influence of Parsee theatres on Surabhi. I wish it could be more detailed. Parsee theatres, after the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Victorian theatre, had specialized in “theatre effects” and “theatre music”. The Surabhi people captured every nuance of the Parsee theatre’s practices and if Surabhi is popular both in the urban and rural areas, it is largely because of these “stage effects”, which they have eminently perfected.

Half of the book is devoted to the present trends and falling standards of Surabhi. It is but natural where professional theatres, at one time, at the tide of theatre activity, has seen the ebb as well. My friend and colleague, Jayashree, grand-daughter of Shri Gubbi Veeranna is here today. She can vouchsafe how Gubbi company, a greatly flourishing theatre enterprise at one time, had to close. If the tradition has to continue, as Prof. Sarma asserts throughout the book, the family as a backing support, is the reason. Prof. Sarma predicts a comfortable future for the Surabhi theatres. I would say it awaits a great future and a national recognition with Prof. Sarma’s book in English, which would reach hundreds of theatre lovers all over the world!

Sarma is not easily satiated with the history of the four generations of the Surabhi families. He talks about the writers for the companies who occupy an important place, as they did in Parsee theatres. There is a great similarity between the Parsee theatres and the Surabhi. It only the present day Surabhi people know why the Parsee theatre failed, they would understand how to save theirs.

If their continued to devotion to theatre and with Prof. Sarma’s excellently researched book Surabhi should go to places in India – to Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta and many other places and been embark on a performance-spree to other countries as well!

We are all thankful to Prof. Sarma for giving us this wholesome account of a theatre group which needs, not help, but our opening into the panorama of world theatre. Thank you, Prof. Sarma.

*( an excerpt from Prof. Bajaj’s lecture on the book at the inaugural and the release of the book)*

