

BELLARY RAGHAVA

the Man who made the Modern Telugu Theatre

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Tadipatri Raghavacharyulu—Raghava as he preferred to be called—had become a legend in the theatre history of Andhra Pradesh even in his own life-time. His death in 1946 has not eroded either his stature as an actor or the high traditions in theatre he helped build up both as an actor and a director. Joining the ranks of an actor at the age of 12, Raghava continued to act and produce plays until almost the last day of his 66 years of eventful life. As an actor, director and producer, as a lawyer and public prosecutor, as a social reformer and spiritualist, Raghava put his heart and soul in every walk of life he chose to tread, and made others around him equal devotees of work and worship.

Raghava was born in his ancestral village, Tadipatri in Ananthpur district of Andhra Pradesh on August 2, 1880, a momentous year which saw the birth of the modern Telugu Theatre.¹ His parents Narasimhacharyulu, a Telugu Pandit at Bellary, and Seshamma were childless for long. The mother worshipped a Shaiva saint Basappa and when Raghava was born, he was named after the saint. However, he was given the Vaishnava name Raghavacharyulu when he was admitted in the school, but, years later, Raghava shed off the Vaishnava suffix "acharyulu" and preferred to be called, simply, "Raghava." Tadipatri was his family name, but, since he hailed from Bellary, he came to be called Bellary Raghava!

Raghava's keen interest in and extraordinary gift for theatre were evident even in his childhood and he made his formal debut on the stage at the age of twelve. He did not have the formal training in music as would befit an actor of the day, nor was he an adept in theatrical music at any time, but he closely observed the leading performers of the day including his own maternal uncle, Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu, a well-known playwright and actor, and accustomed himself to the rigours of the profession.

Raghava's formal education started at Bellary and continued, first,

at the Madras Christian College and then at the Law College. His theatrical education continued simultaneously. He gained considerable reputation as a Shakespearean actor while still in college and this inspired him to start a Shakespeare Club when he settled down at Bellary as a lawyer's junior and trained several actors with whom he staged *Othello*, *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice*.

His first successful Shakespearean production *Othello*, at Bellary in 1906, was very significant, for Raghava attracted the attention of another famous advocate and playwright-producer, Kolachalam Srinivasa Rao who invited Raghava to join his "Sumanorama Sabha," a theatre group mainly producing Telugu plays written by himself. Even by that time, his uncle, Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharyulu, under whom he was working as a junior lawyer, had won reputation both as a playwright and actor and had already founded a dramatic troupe, "Sarasa Vinodini Sabha." Raghava preferred to join not his uncle, Dharmavaram's troupe, but Kolachalam's for many reasons, the obvious one being the unjustifiable importance (according to Raghava), given by Dharmavaram, to musical rendering of poems and songs in his productions.² Another reason for Raghava's preference might be due to his temperamental disavowal of mythological plays, which abounded in his uncle's repertoire, in contrast with Kolachalam's historical plays and ethical plays based on imaginary themes. However, there was a marked change in his attitude to mythological plays in later years when he realized that in a strongly mythical based country like India, a moral brought out through a traditional story would have a greater import. This, in fact, helped him a great deal when he took to reinterpreting several traditional roles.

During the early days of his association with Sumanorama Sabha, Raghava continued to direct and act in English plays, mainly of Shakespeare and Sheridan. Both at Bellary and at Bangalore where he performed often, his name became well-known. Both Dr. D. Gundappa, the great Kannada critic and playwright and K. Sampathgiri Rao, another critic, literateur and actor, testify that Raghava's plays at Bangalore drew great numbers.³ This association with Bangalore brought him into close contact with the Kannada stage. On the request of the eminent Kannada actor, A.V. Varadacharya, Raghava started acting for the Amateur Dramatic Association (ADA) of Bangalore and soon became its star performer. Tagore, C.F. Andrews, Sarojini Naidu and other national leaders extolled Raghava's fine acting abilities. Gurudev Tagore thought that Raghava was a greater actor than Bengal's Sisir Bhaduri.⁴

In 1927, when Gandhiji came to Nandi Hills for rest, ADA requested him to attend Pandit Taranath's *Deena Bandhu Kabir*, a play in Hindi put on specially for the Mahatma. Gandhiji accepted the invitation but said that he could stay only for a few minutes. The play started. As the time to leave approached, Rajaji reminded Gandhiji that it was time for his prayer. "Are

we not praying now?" encountered Gandhiji's spiritual sense. He stayed on until the end of the play and showed his pleasure and appreciation by hailing, "Raghava Maharaj ki Jai!"⁵

Raghava acted in many Kannada plays put up by ADA during 1906-1926. His name as an actor had spread far and wide and any announcement of his participation in a play had drawn people and, with them, money. Artistic circles in Bangalore awaited the opening of Raghava's plays with a sense of keen anticipation. Similarly, his plays became popular at Madras. He became a member of the Suguna Vilasa Sabha and soon put up *Fall of Vijayanagar* and *Ramadas*.

Though Raghava staged Telugu, Kannada and English plays extensively in Bellary, Bangalore, Madras and even Hyderabad, he did not tour the Coastal Andhra until 1920. He had a lurking fear in his mind that the Andhra audience was enamoured of musical plays, with a great stress on music. It was a fact that the "musical" play was ruling the Andhra stage at the time and it was generally accepted that a good drama meant a play in which a good singer enunciates different *ragas* to suit the moods of the play's incidents. A play's success mainly depended on the singing abilities of the performer and it didn't matter that he, in the process, threw the probabilities of incidents and realistic acting to the winds !

Raghava's first experience at Vijayawada in 1921, when he produced *Mohini Rukmangada* at the request of his Law College colleague, Guduri Laxman Rao, was miserable. There were whispers to start with which ended up in a fiasco, the audience demanding the play be stopped. Raghava's fears came true. He was only sorry that the audience should have given him *one* chance so that he could prove his mettle. Thoroughly disappointed, he cut short his visit to the northern parts of the State. On his way back, however, he stopped over at Guntur, where he met Kopparapu Subba Rao, a great playwright and producer who convinced Raghava that what he had seen was not the entire Andhra and what he had experienced was in no way a typical Andhra reaction. He introduced Raghava to an understanding and appreciative audience. It was only then that Raghava continued his tour. In spite of early opposition from, and raised eye-brows of, the orthodox, Raghava played at different places from Vizianagaram to Nellore and captured the love of innumerable theatre lovers. Soon, Andhra audiences appreciated his plays and his theatrical interpretations and, by 1927, he made many successful trips to Coastal Andhra staging such varied plays as *Fall of Vijayanagar*, *Ramdas*, *Prahlada*, *Paduka*, *Chitranaleeyam* in Telugu and *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Merchant of Venice* in English.

In spite of initial reservations, the Andhra audiences showered on him affection and respect when once he gained their attention. Tours became annual features, but also became cumbersome, unwieldy and expensive. So

Raghava conceded the request of the local associations in Andhra to participate in the plays along with the local actors. He, with two or three other actors, would go to the place a few days in advance, rehearse with the local actors, give final touches and stage the play. Raghava's presence greatly helped local talent: it not only boosted the morale of the actors, but forced them to give of their best because Raghava would brook no second-rate performance. Thus there was a new impetus among the actors, for Raghava's acting with them was a special honour and a great satisfaction! His fame became so firmly established that he made his eventful journey, along with his troupe, to Rangoon in 1927 and staged plays for fifteen days.

In the year 1928, Raghava visited England to study theatrical activities there, for he thought that such an exposure would be of immense use to him. This trip brought him into contact with dramatists like George Bernard Shaw, actors like Mr. & Mrs. Forbes Robertson and critics like Ashley Dukes.

There are many anecdotes of Raghava's encounter with George Bernard Shaw. Raghava's own diaries tell us at least one such where Raghava describes his first meeting with Shaw. The time given to Raghava for "an interview" was ten minutes, but the interview soon turned into an exchange of views and went on for eighty minutes! At the end of the chat, Shaw told Raghava:

Why did you come here to learn art? It is we who should go to the East to learn art, religion and poetry.⁶

Raghava's visit to London and other European cities (he visited Paris, Rome and Brussels) and his observations of theatrical practices there left mixed reactions in him. While he liked the emergence of the Problem Play in England which attempted at a realistic rendering of the common man's anxieties and worries, he felt that, since the solutions to these problems were invariably absent, the success of such plays was only partial.

Raghava also liked the way in which regular training was imparted to actors (the idea was so struck in Raghava's mind that he later pleaded for such a training centre to be started at Madras), but he disliked the acting methods used in the Western countries which, he felt, did not leave any scope for improvisation and creative interpretation. According to Raghava, these were the most important factors that the actor contributed to the over-all success of the performance. He felt that the Western acting methods were too rigid and mechanical and so not acceptable.

There are, however, two positive results of Raghava's foreign tour. One was the emphasis on the need of women actors to play female roles. Raghava also felt the need of the problem play. He quickly acted in both

directions, emphasized them in the Ibsen Birth Centenary Celebrations held at Madras in 1928 and persuaded his friend Dr. P.V. Rajamannar to write such plays. He produced Rajamannar's *Tappevaridi* in 1930. The play started a new era in the history of Telugu Dramatic literature and both Rajamannar and Raghava were responsible for ushering in this New Era of social awareness in Telugu theatrical history. Raghava, likewise, persuaded ladies from respectable families who had histrionic talents to participate in plays. It was with Raghava's persuasive assurance that Madapati Sarojini, Komimuri Padmavati and Kopparapu Sarojini came on to the stage and soon became well-known actresses. The credit for such a revolutionary change on the Telugu stage goes to Raghava and his efforts.

Raghava always insisted on the homogeneity of a theatrical production. He emphasized the need for staging well-rehearsed plays. Even when he was a busy Public Prosecutor at Bellary, he would find time to go to the place of performance well in advance, rehearse his play with the local actors many times and then only approve of the production. This emphasis had become necessary because the 30's were prominently the days of "contract plays." During the depression days, the traditional patrons of theatre groups had severe financial constraints. Their place was taken by contractors whose main aim was money-making. These contractors "contracted" actors from different parts of the State who would assemble at the performance place just on the day of the performance. So the play was a hotch-potch of irresponsible actors without any team work and with the unholy desire for money-making. "The longer a song's *raga* was enunciated, the greater the actor" was the typical response of the audience. This unhealthy atmosphere vitiated the clean air of amateur dramatics and turned art into commerce and disgusting gimmicks. Raghava vehemently opposed the contract plays and the selfish motives implied in the system. He not only rejected to act in such plays, but would not render any assistance to teams which turned to contractors for help.

Raghava's entry into the world of cinema was abortive. He acted in three movies, *Draupadi Mana Samrakshanam*, *Rytu Bidda* and *Chandika*. He objected to the mechanical acting methods adopted by the directors. He also found that money and not art was the directing force behind the movie makers. He felt stifled. He thought that there was no scope for original acting in cinemas. His exit from cinema was a blessing in disguise for the theatre, for he continued his unruffled stage career with redoubled dedication.

Raghava, in his enthusiasm to present problem plays, had written a play *Saripadani Samgathulu* (Unpalatable Things) in 1933 on the theme of widow remarriage. The problem was very real and topical, but the play failed to keep up a lively interest and was marred by too much didacticism.

It was also ironical to note that a man like Raghava, associated with the theatre for twenty years by then could write a play with long speeches and soliloquies, with too many scenes which make staging difficult. However, as C.R. Reddy pointed out, Raghava should be congratulated for writing a play "which has sincerity of feeling and power of thought."⁷

Raghava, along with Rajamannar, had completed another play *Tegani Samasya* (Unsolved Problem) by 1946 and the staging of this play was Raghava's last act for the theatre. As critics pointed out, the play was well sustained. The theme of divorce—which is the theme of the play—is central to Raghava's social thinking.

Raghava achieved unprecedented success on the stage by sheer dint of hard work and imaginative innovations. But he was endowed with many prerequisites that served him well on the stage. He had "fine physical features, a well-chiselled nose and broad forehead, surmounted by luxuriant hair that could be made up according to the demands of the character. He had keen eyes and sensitive lips which he used to good advantage in conveying his emotions."⁸

One of the most original innovations Raghava achieved on the stage was in reinterpreting the traditional mythological roles by humanizing the demon characters. The interpretations he had given to characters like Yama in *Savitri* and Hiranya Kasipa in *Prahlada* brought him into bitter conflict with orthodox critics and actors. Traditionally, these roles demanded the actor's "growling and prowling, roaming and foaming" around the stage, in every direction. Raghava's enunciation of these roles, though criticised initially, was received with critical approval and approbation in course of time.

Raghava presented Hiranya Kasipa as a powerful man torn between parental affection and innate convictions, between tortures of private and public conscience. The old order of screaming and raving and ranting had given way to a psychological portrayal of the conflict in the character. In interpreting the character of Yama, Raghava averted the traditional physical demands of the role, both in terms of external attire and the manifestation of *bhibhatsa rasa*. Raghava came on to the stage with a *dhotti* and an *anga vastra*, with marks of *vibhuti* on his forehead and a *yagnopavita*. He was insistent, but calm when he talked to Savitri. His portrayal of *Shanta rasa* was in marked contrast with the performances of all the earlier 'yamas' who retained the 'high key' all the way to show yama as irritated; ill-tempered, easily angered, perpetually on the verge of emotional outburst. No feature of his acting is thus more distinctive than such natural infusion into his heroic vein of some original touch of truth which gave reality to the scene.

Two other roles that Raghava mastered need to be mentioned here—

Ramadasu and Pathan. Ramadasu, the title role of the play, based on the story of Gopanna, a devotee of Shri Rama, written by his other uncle, Dharmavaram Gopalacharyulu, needed controlled action on the stage. Raghava excelled himself in the role. In passages of profound sorrow, of concentrated pathos, especially when Gopanna comes to know of his only son's sudden death, during a feast he was giving to the saints and devotees, Raghava's great histrionic art could be seen in its right perspective. "Playing" an ideal host on one hand, and yet suppressing the tones of suffering of a broken heart on the other—it is in portraying such intense situations of conflicting emotions that Raghava's real strength as an actor lay. Such was his enactment of the role of Pathan in *Fall of Vijayanagar*.

In his portrayal of Pathan, Raghava was praised for the classical restraint of his performance, his dignity, and the harmonious marriage of his physical expression with the words of the text. It is in this play, more than in any other, that he introduced innovative entrances and exits. "His secret," writes a critic, "was an association or an adaptation of his look to his voice. Raghava perfected this technique to such a degree that it became his peculiar felicity to be heard and seen the same. ...that the blind have seen him in his voice, and the deaf have heard him in his visage."⁹ His stage whispers in this play are of particular dramatic interest.

Such careful attention to detailed physical action and vocal modulations could be seen in his role of Rama Raju in *Sarangadhara*, where the royal father sits on judgement in the hanging of his own son. "The decorous representation of royal dignity even in minor business is the distinctive excellence of Raghava," says Banda Kanakalingeswar Rao, Raghava's co-actor in the play.

Through these and many other interpretative and innovative elements, Raghava brought a new sense of psychological realism in the realm of acting which needed a careful study not only of the character within the play, but the over-all milieu and the mythical context of the whole theme. His thoughtful interpretations of traditional characters and his "studied" informality of technique have added a new dimension to traditional acting techniques. His avowed defiance of the Musicals in which the *vachika* (mainly music) and *aaharya* were given prominence in preference to psychological plays which demanded greater reliance on *angika* and *sattvika* and his strong belief in the ethical dimensions of theatre, changed the entire contemporary attitudes to theatre and gained a healthy and respectful reliance on drama as "serious entertainment." He brought remarkable changes in the presentational aspects of drama. He was largely instrumental in turning the attention of the playgoers and writers to the relevance of plays with social purpose. He was responsible for ladies taking up female roles in plays. He transformed the theatre from its being a place for musical entertainment to a temple where earnest devotees look forward to noble sentiments.

Raghava was not merely a great actor and director. As a lawyer and as Public Prosecutor he was known for his strict adherence to the ethics of the profession. He added a human and personal touch to the profession. As E.E. Mack, the then Magistrate of Bellary testifies :

Raghava was an outstanding advocate, a fine and versatile actor and a charming and lovable man. During my judicial training in Bellary, he helped to teach me, by his facile advocacy and human approach to all his cases, to love judicial work. . . . His histrionic ability and deep knowledge of humanity invested even in the dullest case, civil or criminal with unflagging interest.¹⁰

Raghava was greatly influenced by Pandit Taranath, a saint, who had established an *ashram* on the banks of the Tungabhadra. Raghava performed plays in aid of this ashram. It was under his influence that Raghava turned his *pūja* room into a place of "great catholicity" where he kept the portraits of Rama, Christ and Mohammed. In his later years, Raghava spent considerable time in singing *bhajans* in this room.

Raghava's aptitude for social work was inspired by Gandhiji and brought him into close contact with Harijans. He founded a school for them in Bellary, which even today imparts free education to the socially-deprived classes. The Harijan students participated in the weekly *bhajan* sessions in his house. He assisted orphans, educated them and found them employment. This activity was vehemently opposed by the orthodox Vaishnava relatives and friends and he was even excommunicated! Raghava smiled the opposition away and won all his enemies by sheer dint of friendly persuasion.

Raghava helped the needy in general, and the needy artists in particular. He accepted, in spite of his busy professional obligations and failing health, demands to participate in plays staged for the benefit of actors.

Raghava's last wish was to stage the play, *Tegani Famasya*, written by Rajamannar and himself. Finally the play was put on in spite of his deteriorating health, on March 23, 1946. His acting in the play in the role of Narasimha Rao was greatly praised. Hardly twenty days later, on April 16, 1946 Raghava passed away.

As a man who has enthused the dormant Telugu stage, and as an actor and director who remained an active participant for half a century, as a visionary who has shown the right direction to the actors and producers at a time of great need, as a conscientious artist devoted to his art and his profession, as a bold innovator and interpreter, and, above all, as a man and a humanist, Raghava lives long in the memories of the grateful theatre-lovers of Andhra.

NOTES

1. Though Modern Telugu drama seemed to have started in the year 1860 with Korada Ramachandra Sastry's play, *Manjari Madhukareeyam*, it was not until 1880 that dramatic productions were undertaken. The first play to be staged is Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu's *Vyavahara Dharma Bodhini*.
2. According to Mr. D. Venugopalachari, son of Dharmavaram Ramakrishnacharyulu and son-in-law of Raghava, his father was a great singer and, in fact, it was his father he was responsible for bringing importance to "dramatic music," whereas Raghava did not know much of music and so used to ridicule his father's overemphasis on music in dramas. See D. Venugopalachari, "Sangha Samskarta, Jaatiya Vaadi," Madras, *Parisodhana*, Dec.-Jan., 1955.
3. See D.V. Gundappa, "Sri T. Raghavachari," Bellary *Raghava Memorial Souvenir*, 1965, and K. Sampathgiri Rao, "Some Reminiscences of Raghava," Bellary, *Raghava Memorial Souvenir*, 1964.
4. It was reported that when Tagore was asked "Who, according to him was a better actor, Raghava or Bahduri?" Tagore seemed to have answered: "Sisirda is a great actor of the Bengali Stage; Raghava is the best actor in India." See P.S.R. Appa Rao, *Telugu Nataka Vikasamu*, p. 558.
5. K. Desapati Rao, *Bellary Raghava*, p. 27.
6. K. Desapati Rao, *Bellary Raghava*, p. 64.
7. Quoted in K. Desapati Rao, *Bellary Raghava*, Appendix 2, p.v.
8. K.Sampathgiri Rao, "Some Reminiscences of Raghava," Bellary, *Raghava Memorial Souvenir*, 1964.
9. Puranam Suri Sastry, *Natyambujamu*, Bandar; Vidyanilayamu, 1923, p. 88.
10. E.E. Mack, "Message," Bellary *Raghava Memorial Souvenir*, 1964.